



*jeevadhara*

# **INDIAN CHURCHES SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND CHALLENGES TODAY 2**

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**Edited by  
Kuncheria Pathil**

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# jeevadhara

A JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

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## Indian Churches Self-Understanding and Challenges Today 2

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## Editorial

*The Catholic Churches in India: Self-Understanding and Challenges Today* was the theme of *Jeevadhara*, Volume XXXIII, No. 196, July 2003. It was an attempt to introduce the rich diversity within the Roman Catholic Communion in India. Besides presenting the identity and challenges of the three Catholic Individual Churches in India (the Syro-Malabar Church, the Latin Church and the Syro-Malankara Church), the diversity within each Church and the possibility for further healthy diversification in the context of their new challenges were also highlighted to some extent. In the Editorial of that Number, we promised that the theme of Self-Understanding and the Challenges of the other Churches in India also would be taken up in another Number of *Jeevadhara*. The present Number fulfills that promise made to our readers.

In this Number, we introduce briefly the identity and the present challenges of six Indian Churches, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church, Malabar Independent Syrian Church, the Mar Thoma Church, the Assyrian Church of the East in India, and the Church of South India. Of these six Churches, the first five originally belonged to the ancient St. Thomas Christians of South India. Due to various historical and theological reasons, these Churches became separated from one another during the Colonial Period. The first major division among the St. Thomas Christians happened in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century into Roman Catholic and Jacobite, in the aftermath of the confrontation between the Portuguese and the Thomas Christians. The Malabar Independent Church is an offshoot of the Jacobite Church in 1772, and the Mar Thoma Church is the resulted of a more radical attempt to reform the Jacobite Church by Abraham Malpan and others in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Assyrian (Chaldean) Church of the East in India (Trichur) has its separate existence in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the context of the Rockos-Mellus issue in the Syro-Malabar Church. The sixth Church which we have

introduced in the present Number is the Church of South India, a United Protestant Church formed in 1947 out of four Churches, the Anglican, the Methodist, the Presbyterian and the Congregational Churches.

The merit of these profiles of Indian Churches, on their self-understanding and challenges today, is that they are written by scholars who belong to these Churches and are committed to them. Their understanding and interpretations of historical facts are indeed different, and it is quite natural they are and will be different. Pure facts of history are not available, but only their interpreted versions. We hope that these articles will provide ample opportunities for mutual understanding and dialogue, and it will give impetus to common historical and theological research. Once again we promise to our readers that this ecumenical exercise will be continued in the next July Number 2005, which will take up the cases of the rest of other main line Churches in India, and thus we hope to complete this series.

Our message to the readers is very simple: The One Church of Jesus Christ exists in the many Churches; the many and different Churches exist in the One Church of Christ. What exist in the historical plane are the many concrete individual Churches with their different individuality and uniqueness. Unity of the Churches does not in any way mean uniformity or conformity of Churches, but unity in diversity. The rich diversity of Christian Churches is a great blessing as well as beauty, which should be safeguarded by all means for the wholeness of the Gospel and the fullness of truth.

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# **The Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church: Identity, Challenges and Problems Today**

**Adai Jacob\***

## **1. Prologue**

It is not an easy task to present a picture of the Malankara Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church in a simple and concise form doing justice to the enormous problems and challenges it faced. Yet in our ecumenical era such a picturing is essential in order that the various churches in India may know each other and understand each other. Here an attempt is made to introduce the Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church in India to others. I will try to sort out the various factors that show the identity of the Jacobite Syrian church and present some of the problems and challenges the church faces today.

## **I. Identity of the Church**

### **2. St. Thomas as the Founder of Christian Church in India**

Who brought Christianity to India? Believers belonging to all the Christian Churches would answer in one voice – St. Thomas, the Apostle of Jesus Christ. The Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church also holds the same view. St. Thomas reached Kodungalloor by ship in AD 52 to preach the Gospel in India. Middle east countries and Kerala had trade relations during the early centuries and therefore it was not difficult for St. Thomas to reach the coast of Kerala in a Merchant ship. Coins of

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Augustus Caesar excavated from Kerala is a clear evidence to trade relations between South India and Middle East countries. It is a widely accepted tradition that St. Thomas reached the coast of Kerala, visited various places, preached the Gospel and baptised many.

The Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church also strongly believes that St. Thomas, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ, had brought the Christian faith to India. There exists a strong age-old tradition in the Jacobite Syrian Church about the arrival, mission, death and burial of St. Thomas and also about the relics of his mortal body. No other country or people make such a claim about St. Thomas. It is believed that as a result of his mission high Brahmins of Pakalomattom, Shankarapuri, Kalli and Kalliangal families were ordained priests. Besides he is believed to have founded churches at Maliankara, Paloor, Kottakkavu, Chayal (Nilakkal), Niranam, Quilon and Gokamangalam. He later went to China to preach the gospel and returned to India. During his second mission he was killed by the fanatics and buried at Mylapore in the state of Tamil Nadu. However, his relics were taken from India and transferred to Edessa in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century according to the directions of the Patriarch of Antioch.

### **3. Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church as part of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church**

The Syrian Orthodox Church in India functions as an integral part of the Universal Syrian Orthodox church. So it is necessary to deal briefly about this Universal Church. When we study the pre-eminence of Antioch, which has been rightly acknowledged as the Capital of Syrian Church, we will know the crucial position accorded to the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church in the history of Christianity. Though the Christian Church was first established in Jerusalem, due to severe persecutions, those who gave leadership to the church were forced to leave Jerusalem and they adopted Antioch as their centre of activity. Not only did Antioch functioned as a place of refuge, but it turned out also to be a fertile ground for the propagation of the Gospel. Soon Antioch became the capital of the whole Christendom. The name 'Christian' for believers was first used at Antioch and that is an ample reason to establish the importance of Antioch. (Act 11:26) St. Paul the greatest missionary of the church had adopted Antioch as the centre of his missionary activities. St. Paul along with Barnabas used Antioch as a centre to spread Gospel and established Churches in various places.



St. Peter who gave leadership to the primitive Church was not able to continue his work in Jerusalem because of persecution. Therefore he also chose Antioch as the centre of his activities. Antioch was in short a place of refuge, chosen even by God to safeguard the infant church from perils of oppression. So it could be established that the first Century Church of Antioch had all the attributes of a full-fledged Church and could be rightly called one, Holy, catholic and Apostolic. Just as St. Peter was its supreme head so also even now, for the Syrian Orthodox Church, Antioch is the capital and Patriarch of Antioch as the successor of St. Peter, the supreme head of the church. The Syrian Orthodox church is in this way a remnant of the most ancient church that was born in Jerusalem and brought up in Antioch.

This basic ecclesiological standpoint of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church must be understood first. Then only we can grasp the disposition of Syrian Orthodox Church in India because the church in India is a part of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church. The Catholicity of the church is an inseparable part of the profession of faith about the church. Since the Syrian Orthodox Church too is Catholic it can only remain Universal transcending territorial boundaries. Though Catholicity is mainly a qualitative attribute, the quantitative and geographical aspect cannot be ignored.

#### **4. Position of the Patriarch of Antioch**

The book of Acts is explicit in its exposition with regard to the rank accorded to St. Peter. St. Peter took up the leadership of the Church of Jerusalem after Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Even when he was with Jesus as one of the twelve disciples, St. Peter acted as the Chief, emissary and spokesman of the lot. His primacy is underscored biblically which leaves no room to doubt otherwise. By 37 A.D. Antioch became the Capital of the Universal Church and St. Peter, its head. Since St. Peter had assumed the leadership of the Church and had made use of Antioch as the capital to lead the church, those who are consecrated as Patriarchs by the Church to succeed St. Peter are no doubt the successors and representatives of St. Peter. The divine grace is handed down from Jesus to St. Peter from Peter to his successors the Patriarchs, the Patriarchs to Metropolitans, the Metropolitans to the Priests, and from the priest to the whole believers in the Church. Thus in the Syrian Orthodox Church the Patriarch represents the first and the foremost link in respect of the transfer of the Apostolic succession, divine priesthood and spiritual grace.

The Universal Syrian Orthodox Church perceives its strength and unity in his holiness the Patriarch, the Supreme spiritual head of the Church. As the successor of St. Peter, his Holiness is the embodiment and symbol of unity of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church. This embodiment signifies two types of representative characters. Firstly St. Peter is the chief shepherd and supreme head, the Patriarch by virtue of his position upholds the unity of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church. Since the Patriarch's consecration and coronation are deemed to be through the grace of the Holy Ghost and by the will of God, the first representative character is bestowed from above and is divine. So the patriarch as the high priest of the Universal Church, represents Jesus Christ when he celebrates the holy Eucharist. Secondly the Patriarch as the chief shepherd of the church, represents the entire body of believers. The church is not only an invisible spiritual fellowship but is also a historical reality. So, all the attributes of the church like One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic must also become a historical reality. And the Patriarchs who are consecrated from time to time represent the universal church as the supreme heads and they make the unity of the church and its attributes a historical reality.

### **5. The Ecumenical Synod of Nicea and the Patriarch of Antioch**

From AD 52 till the Synod of Nicea in AD 325 the church in India that was established in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, existed as a separate entity. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century it became debilitated due to inept management and due to insufficient leadership. But in the later half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Pantenus, who was the president of the theological Institute of Alexandria reached Malankara and worked hard to rejuvenate the church. And when in A.D. 325, the Synod at Nicea was convened, the entire Christian community all over the world came under the authority of one of the three Patriarchates then in existence, namely Rome, Alexandria and Antioch. A Persian bishop by name Yohannan represented India in that Synod, the veracity of which is evident from his signature in the Nicea synod. Accordingly all the eastern churches including the church in India came under the Patriarchate of Antioch.

### **6. A Brief Survey of the Relation with the Mother Church of Antioch**

#### *(a) The First Syrian Christian Migration*

In AD 345, 20 years after Nicean synod a group led by knai Thomas



came down to Malankara from Edessa (Uraha), the then powerful centre of Syrian Christians. There were 72 families consisting of 400 members. Among them was the strong and vibrant Joseph Bishop, who no doubt was under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Antioch. Though there was a Catholicose in Selucia, he too was under the Patriarch of Antioch. The arrival of Bishop Joseph and the group of Syrian Christians were a blessing to the Kerala Church which was in a rudderless state. Thereafter the name 'Syrians' or Surianikkar became established.

*(b) Evidences of Relationship with Antioch in the 4<sup>th</sup> till 7<sup>th</sup> Centuries*

It is believed that during the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, there were Indian theological students in the famous Theological Institute of Edessa. The study on John Chrisostom (Ivaneos of the golden tongue) and the reputed Theological Scholar Jerome reveal that the holy Bible was then translated into Indian languages. It is also learnt that Jerome, who was brought up at Antioch, had Indian pupils as his students. It is clear that even as early as in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Malankara had powerful relationship with Antioch. It is significant that the relics of St. Thomas was taken to Edessa, which was under the authority of the Patriarch of Antioch. If the Patriarch had no jurisdiction over Malankara, this could not have taken place. This occurred in A.D. 394, which serves as a shining example of the Antioch – Malankara Kinship. When we study the 7<sup>th</sup> century history of Indian Church, it is discernible that when in need of Bishops, we used to select suitable persons and send them to the Patriarch of Antioch. In the historical accounts on the Alexandrian Patriarchs, written by Isidoros in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, it is mentioned that the Indian Christians were ruled by the Patriarch of Antioch.

*(c) The 2<sup>nd</sup> Syrian Christian Migration*

In the 9<sup>th</sup> century the Syrian Fathers Mor Shabor and Mor Aphrot reached Malankara. They came with a group of immigrants in A.D 822 and reached the then trade centre Quilon. They were accorded certain privileges and rights by the king. That they were saintly persons is amply proved by the fact that there were many churches in their names which is corroborated by the records of the decisions of the "Synod of Diamper".

The Latin bishop Fransico Ross states that there were even books in their names. The fact that their venerated memory is being celebrated only by the Jacobite Christians as also their names do not figure in the



list of those Nestorian Bishops deputed to India and China by the then Nestorian Catholicose, it is clear that the contention, that they may have been Nestorian as recorded in the decisions of the Synod of Diamper, is wrong. Moreover, in the ancient church at Akaparambu, their memory is celebrated on the 19<sup>th</sup> *Vrichikam* (Malayalam Month) every year.

*(d) Situation of the Church from 10<sup>th</sup> till 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries*

During the 10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup> centuries the Malankara church was under the authority of the Patriarch of Antioch. This is authenticated in the Travancore State Manual as also in the book authorised by the protestant historian Huff. As for the 12<sup>th</sup> century, there is an authoritative record safely maintained at Cambridge University. This record is the one written in Estrangela script during the time of the great Patriarch Michael (1199). This book was presented to Dr. Buchannan in 1807 by the Malankara Metropolitan. In this book there is reference to St. Mary as the mother of God, which is against the Nestorian faith and on celebration of Holy Qurbana on Saturday during the period of Lents. It is advised in the book to celebrate the memory of the Patriarch of Antioch Mor Severios.

*(e) Period of Nestorian Domination*

From A.D 1490 till 1599 Malankara Church had received Metropolitans from the Nestorian Church in Persia. Before the arrival of Portugese the Malankara Syrian Christians may not have had any appreciable knowledge of Theology and its deep religious ramifications. Moreover, since there was certain similarities in the liturgy and rituals of both the Jacobite Christians and Nestorians, those bishops who were deputed by the Nestorian Patriarchs of Persia were accepted here with warmth. Yet it cannot be assumed that the entire Malankara church took to the Nestorian faith. This presumption is supported from the decisions of 'Synod of Diamper' in which it is recorded that, before the arrival of Portugese, there were people who held Diascoros of Antioch as their holy father and that West Syriac was in use here in addition to the use of East Syriac and that the liturgy of baptism used by the Jacobite Syrian was in operation. Yet it may be supposed that from 1490 till 1599 and when the synod of Diamper was convened the church might have been under the domination of Nestorians.

*(f) Period of Roman Catholic domination*

On June 20, 1599 the Roman Catholic Arch Bishop Menezes convened the historical synod of Diamper. Consequently, the Malankara

Church fell under the supreme authority of Rome and it continued to be so still the famous 'oath at koonam cross' (Koonam Kurisu Sathyam) at Mattanchery in 1653. The Malankara Church had to suffer servitude and indignities under the Roman Catholic Bishops. In 1650 Thoma Archdeacon who was giving leadership to Malankara Jacobite Church appealed to the throne of Antioch for deputing bishops. Accordingly, the Patriarch of Antioch sent Mar Abdullah who arrived in Surat in 1653. The tradition is that the portugese arrested him, tied him up and threw him into the ocean. That was the immediate reason for the famous oath at Koonan cross, in which the decision was taken to cut all the relations with the Roman Catholic Church.

*(g) Restoration of relation with the Patriarch of Antioch*

The Malankara church sent request to the Patriarch again and in 1665 Mor Gregorious of Jerusalem was deputed to Malankara. The link between Malankara and Antioch that was broken and remained separated for about 150 years was re-established with the arrival of this holy father. Mor Gregorious ordained Archdeacon as Bishop who assumed charge as Marthoma I. And once again, Malankara Church came under the supreme authority of the Patriarch of Antioch and it became the integral part of the Syrian Orthodox Church adopting its rituals, rites and liturgy as before. Since then, the church had to put up with stiff challenges, trials and tribulations, yet it stays steadfastly with the universal Syrian Orthodox Church and that it continues to be under the supremacy of the throne of Antioch which is one of the three Patriarchates as envisaged by the Synod of Nicea. It is not correct to say that the church in India had been a separate independent entity having no link with the Universal Church. Though the church that came under the supremacy of the Patriarch of Antioch after the Universal Synod at Nicea in A.D 325 had suffered greatly in the course of history it continued to be a part of the ancient Syrian Orthodox Church.

## **7. The Jacobite Syrian Church and the Syriac language**

Most of the ancient churches are named after the root language in which their liturgy and other books of worships are written and followed. So the Catholic church is called Latin Church and Eastern orthodox church is called Greek Church. Similarly, since Syriac is used as the basic language for its liturgy and worship, Syrian Orthodox Church is known as the Syrian Church. Moreover, those Syrian churches under

the Patriarch of Antioch and have Antioch as their center are also called Syrian irrespective of the language they speak. The works of many church fathers and several invaluable liturgical volumes have been written in syriac. Above all, in comparison to other languages it rightly deserves a special status. The language of Palestine in the first century was Aramaic. It can safely be assumed that the languages of Jesus and disciples was Aramaic. In course of time several other dialects originated from Aramaic. Syriac language was originated from Aramic and it became popular in Edessa as its center of evolution. Syriac may be considered as an improved version of Aramaic. Syriac has a decisive status in the history of various Bible translations during the early centuries. By the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Edessa became the center for the growth of syriac language and the old testament and new testament were translated into Syriac. Nisibis was another center like Edessa during the early centuries where Syriac literature and language made rapid progress. Even a university for the Syrians alone was established there. Mor Jacob of Edessa who gave leadership to this University during the early 4<sup>th</sup> century was the teacher of the great poet Mor Ephrem. The Theological school of Edessa and Nissibis were great centers of theological and biblical studies and syriac was used as medium of instruction.

The theological dispute that began during the 5<sup>th</sup> century had its influence on syriac language too. After this dispute, Syrian orthodox church began to use West Syriac and the East Syrian Church also known as Nestorian church began to use East Syriac as their sacramental language.

The liturgical and sacramental prayers of the Syrian orthodox church are really unique treasures. They contain deep theological statements fully based on and rooted in the Bible. The uniqueness of the Syrian orthodox Church has to be discovered in the liturgy and sacraments prepared by the Syrian fathers. More study and research is necessary in this field. If all the writings of the syriac fathers are brought to light, it can give great contributions to whole Christendom.

## **8. Identity in Faith and traditions**

The Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church's faith, traditions and liturgy are similar to those observed by the universal Syrian orthodox church such as the faith in holy trinity, Jesus Christ as the incarnation of the son of God, Holy cross, the church, Holy Bible, the validity of the



traditions, the creed of Nicea, the observations of the sacramental rites, intercession to St. Mary and saints, rites after death, prayers for the dead, daily prayers, lent fasting, celebration of the holy Eucharist on Sundays and other sacred days, church consecration, the three stages of priesthood which has the Apostolic succession that comes from St. Peter through the Holy Throne of Antioch, preserving the apostolic laying on hands, baptism, the Holy cross, the three Holy ecumenical synods and the veneration of the relics of the saints.

The Syrian orthodox church accepts only three ecumenical synods names Nicea (A.D 325), Constantinople (A.D.381) and Ephesus (A.D 431) as the Universal synods. The church meticulously observe all declaration of faith of the Nicean creed. The western church later appended a statement to this creed attributing the Holy Ghost to be originating from Son also, (Filioque) which we do not accept. The church does not accept the argument of Euticus who held that the human nature of Jesus Christ was totally merged with the divine nature and became one nature (Monophysite). The church believes that Jesus Christ is one person out of two natures, namely human and divine. He is perfect man and perfect God. But western church wrongly construed it as Monophysitism. This was an unfortunate error that crept into the Western Church History. But this anomaly was removed as a result of the deliberations at Vienna under the auspices of 'pro-orient'. The faith of Oriental orthodox churches like Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian are in line with the faith of the Syrian orthodox Church. The Syrian orthodox church assiduously teaches its members that the church is One, Holy Catholic, and Apostolic and that it is the duty of each member to obey the directives of the church. The sacramental rites such as Baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, confession, priestly orders matrimony and anointment of the sick are held sacred and the members have ardent faith in their efficacy. Among these the first three rites are not only given together, but are most important and each member has to partake in these without fail. The Syrian church believers in infant baptism. Hot and cold ater mixed together is used for baptism. The Eucharist is believed to represent the Body and Blood of Christ. But we do not accept the 'transubstantiation' theory of the Roman Catholic Church, where by the bread and wine are transmuted into the very body and blood of Christ. Leavened bread and wine are used in the Eucharist and given to the believers as the sacred Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

The Holy Bible is revered as the word of God. Every Sunday and on other sacred days, Bible is invariably read. During the sacramental rites and common prayers the Bible is read and the Gospel is read by the priest and as a mark of reverence candles are lit and held on either side. The traditions of the church that have been handed down by the early church fathers are revered fervently and observed strictly as that of Bible. Therefore Bible and the traditions of the church are esteemed as equally valid criteria of faith. The Holy Bible and the traditions of the church are esteemed as the criteria of faith.

The departed souls are remembered in prayers and Holy Qurbana is conducted in their memory. There is another practice of annually celebrating the day of demise of any person with Holy Eucharist and offering of incense at the tomb and also with meeting family members.

St. Mary is the perpetual virgin and mother of God who is esteemed as the first among the saints. Intercessory prayers are offered in the names of saints. Churches are built in their venerated memory and their relics are honoured and their memories are celebrated befittingly. But the concept of immaculate conception for St. Mary is not accepted by the Jacobite Syrian church.

The church teaches that observing of lent, refraining from worldly pleasures is necessary for the spiritual awakening. The church observes every Wednesday and Friday as days of lent. Also there are five Lents annually such as 50 days lent before Easter, the lent of apostles, the lent in the name of St. Mary, the lent before Christmas and the 3 days lent (Nineweh).

The church believes, that it receives apostolic blessings and succession through the Patriarchs seated on the throne of St. Peter at Antioch and the Patriarchs of Antioch are the successors of St. Peter. The apostolic laying on of hands is regarded absolutely essential for the order of priesthood. Those priests who have received such ordination only have the authority to perform the Holy sacraments. The church teaches the priest to be the designate of Christ and as such he is empowered to forgive sins. The believers make secret confession before the priests whenever deemed necessary and the priest forgives the sins in the name of Christ. The Church asserts the need for marriage to those priests who are Vicars of Parishes. Freedom is given to become a married priest or celibate priest. Decision has to be taken before

ordination as a priest. After becoming a celibate priest he is not allowed to marry. But the bishops are unmarried and must adhere to celibacy. The church also teaches that matrimony being sacred, the union of man and woman cannot be separated.

The sick are anointed with sacred oil for healing and for the forgiveness of sins. Basically this sacrament has been conceived for the healing of the sick, but it is now generally misunderstood and observed as the last sacrament just before death. But that is a wrong notion developed in the church through the influence of the Roman Catholic church. The church expects its members to observe Sundays and other sacred days as holy and to refrain from work. Traditionally there are nine such sacred days a year and they are Christmas, Baptism of Jesus, His entry into the church, Gabriel's announcement to St. Mary of the impending birth of the Jesus Christ, Ascension, Transfiguration, Feast of the cross, the ascension of St. Mary the mother of God and feast in memory of St. Peter and St. Paul. In addition to these, other important occasions are St. Thomas Day, Passover, Good Friday, Saturday for the departed souls and Resurrection at the end of passion week. The Jacobite Syrians do not keep or worship idols but the pictures of Jesus, St. Mary and other saints are displayed in the churches and houses. During prayers facing eastward is the practice. The monks in monasteries should pray seven times and laity twice daily. It is also specified that only canonical prayers be used in public worship. The church believes in the second coming of Jesus Christ and in the last judgement.

## 9. Missionary Work

The Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church accords great importance to the propagation of the Gospel. The Evangelistic Association of the East (*Paurasthia Suvishesha Samajam*) is a Missionary Organisation promoted by the Syrian Orthodox church under the Patriarch of Antioch, which is a registered society. Its action plan is to spread the Gospel in rural and settlement areas and to establish schools and churches in these places. The association has been able to establish many such schools, churches, orphanages and other centres.

In view of the unique situation in which Malankara Syrian orthodox church is placed, it was felt that its missionary activities were inadequate and it was decided to organise annual conventions on an all India level. Accordingly, the convention is being conducted during 26 to 31 December



every year, since 1990 at Puthencruz. In addition to this, Gospel work is carried out periodically at diocesan and parish levels all over Kerala. Another Association of the Church engaged in the missionary work is St. Paul's Prayer Fellowship, which regularly conducts preaching of the Gospel as well as devotional talks and urge believers to live in devout fellowship. St. Paul's mission is another organisation engaged in missionary activities. They do marvellous work all over India especially among aborigines and tribals.

The servant of the cross society is another Association that has taken root and flourished in the church, during the last decade. The great social reformer and refuge to the destitute, Mookancheril H.G Mor Osthathos Metropolitan was the founder of this association. Spreading of Gospel among harijans and tribals and improve their social and economic state are its main goals. Nearly 20,000 families believed in Gospel, took Baptism and became Christians. But unfortunately after His Grace's demise, there was no one to give proper guidance and leadership and so the Association and its mission became weak.

In recent times the church has taken initiative in spreading the gospel at various places of the country. A Missionary centre to be set up under the responsibility of a Metropolitan in North India is being contemplated.

### **10. Theological Seminary and Priestly Formation**

The Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church has a theological seminary with all modern facilities, maintaining a very high standard and is functioning as the brain of the church. It is situated at Udayagiri, near Mulanthuruthy. Being an Apostolic church, the Syrian church gives topmost priority to the theological Seminary among all other institutions. The church accomplishes its mission in the world mainly through educated, trained and dedicated priests and the Seminary is the pottery where such individuals are moulded. In addition to this, the seminary functions as an important centre for various other activities. The seminary also functions as the Ecumenical Secretariat of the church. This secretariat conducts ecumenical dialogue with other churches and provides venue and leadership for such dialogues. There is a publication wing in the Seminary which brings out the necessary books for the church. The seminary also imparts leadership to conduct conferences as well as leadership training camps. The seminary is a treasure house that maintains the faith and traditions of the church and is also a centre

for study and research. The seminary is affiliated to the Serampore University and it awards the B.D degree to those who successfully complete the theological course.

### 11. Ecumenical Relationship with other Churches

When compared to other orthodox churches, the Syrian Orthodox church is far ahead in the ecumenical relationship with other churches. The joint statement brought out by H.H. the Patriarch, Yakub III and Pope Paul VI in 1971 is an illustrious example for the concept of growing ecumenical relationship. Faith in Jesus Christ as the incarnate son of god is same for both churches according to the above statement. In Kerala theological dialogue is going on between the Syrian Orthodox Church and Catholic Church in this regard. As a result of this, a document was prepared and both the churches have agreed in principle to have inter church marriages between the members of these churches. The Syrian orthodox church maintains a healthy relationship with the Church of the East and it was decided to admit *kaldaya* students in the theological seminary and this decision has already been implemented. Arrangements are also made for the cooperation with the Independent Syrian Church or Thozhiyoor Church. The Syrian orthodox church has active participation in the ecumenical bodies like W.C.C, N.C.C.I, E.C.C, T.L.C., SEERI etc. There is an ecumenical secretariat functioning in the church to promote ecumenism and to improve the relationship with other churches. The Syrian Orthodox church has an open mind with regard to the relationship with other churches and co operation with various Ecumenical bodies and institutions.

### 12. Administrative Set-up

The administration of Syrian Orthodox Church has been designed in a three-tier system: the Church, the Diocese and the Parish as the three trusts. As the general body of the church, *Jacobite Syrian Christian Association* is convened once in every 5 years. From every parish, according to the strength of its membership, laity and clergy participate in it as delegates. The association elects the managing committee, Metropolitan Trustee, Church secretary and church trustees for the smooth administration of the day to day affairs of the church. Moreover, there is a working committee consisting of members elected from the managing committee as well as the officials elected by the Association which functions as the cabinet of the church. But the authority to take decisions on spiritual matters is vested with the Episcopal Synod.

The church is divided into various dioceses under metropolitans. The *Diocesan General Body* that meets once a year takes important decisions regarding the administration of each diocese. The diocesan council elected by the General body of the diocese functions as the governing body and gives shape to the programmes of the diocese and implements those that are approved by the General body. A priest who is elected as the diocesan Secretary maintains the minutes and presents the accounts and the budget on behalf of the council. The tenure of office of the council and secretary is three years.

Though the parish churches are governed by the diocesan Metropolitan on spiritual matters, all other affairs are dealt by the parish themselves, as semi independent trusts. The administration of Parish is vested with the *General Body of the Parish*. Normally the general body of the parish meets twice in a year. The parish managing committee elected by the general body, implements the decisions of the general body. The parish trustee who is elected by the general body looks after the finance of the Parish and executes the decisions as per the recommendation of the managing committee. The parish secretary who is elected along with the parish trustee, maintains and presents the minutes of the general body as well as that of the managing committee.

## II. Problems and Challenges Today

### 1. Split in the Church

With the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century problems and internal struggles began to appear in the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church. In 1909 H.H. Patriarch Moran Mor Ignatius Abdullah made an apostolic visit to Malankara church. The Malankara Metropolitan Mor Dionysius Geevarghese didn't receive him properly and also made propaganda against the Patriarch. Though several attempts were made for peace and unity, they all failed because of the uncompromising attitude of Mor Dionysius Geevarghese. At last the Patriarch was forced to excommunicate the Malankara Metropolitan and convened the Syrian Christian Association in Aluva and elected office bearers for the administration of the church.

Mor Dionysius Geevarghese called another association in Kottayam against the association held in Aluva. In the association in Kottayam Mor Dionysius refuted the bull of H.H the Patriarch and rejected the decisions made in Aluva. In 1911 Mor Dionysius brought the deposed



Patriarch Moran Mor Abdul Messiah to Malankara and forced him to prepare and sign a Bull establishing the catholicate in Malankara. The Bull was published and the old bishop H.G Mor Ivanios Murimattathil was selected and consecrated as the first Catholicose. With this incident the Syrian Orthodox Church in India was divided into two. A few supported the Catholicose and formed the catholicose faction popularly known as *Metran Kakshi* and the majority supported H.H. the Patriarch to form the Patriarchal faction popularly known as the *Bava Kakshi*. The catholic faction wanted to make a new autocephalous and independent Indian Orthodox Church with the name "Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church". The Patriarchal faction would like to remain as part of the universal Syrian Orthodox Church under H.H. the Patriarch of Antioch and all the East. After the split in the church a series of court cases emerged and there were also several unchristian conflicts and quarrels between the two factions till 1964. In 1964 the Patriarch, Moran Mor Ignatius Yakob III came to India with a firm decision to establish peace and unity. The Patriarch consecrated Mor Augen Themotheos as Catholicose of the East and thus peace and unity were established and the catholicose in turn promised to accept and approve the Patriarch as the supreme spiritual head of the Syrian orthodox church in India. This peace and unity in the church lasted only for seven years, and in 1971 differences of opinion and split emerged again. When the Catholicose and the catholicose faction got all the administrative authority they again began to break the promise and repudiate the authority of the Patriarch. They tried to establish a new throne called the 'Throne of St. Thomas' and the Catholicose was declared to be seated on the throne of St. Thomas and "autocephaly" and 'Independent Indian Orthodox Church' began to be emphasised. The vast majority of the believers belonging to the Patriarchal faction are naturally against such developments.

## 2. Problems

### i. Lack of Christian Witness

Because of unchristian quarrel and split, the church is not in a position to bear a real Christian witness in an unchristian world like India. The way of Jesus has to be revealed to others through the attitudes and activities of the church. There is no meaning in our existence without a living and dynamic Christian witness. There are indeed a lot of hidden goodness that the church imparts and which are taken into consideration by God. One of the important themes for Theological dialogue between

Roman Catholic Church and Syrian Orthodox Church is “bearing common witness in India”.

*ii. Lack of Efficient Leadership*

Being an Episcopal church, leadership of efficient Bishops is crucially important for the Jacobite Syrian Church. The age old tradition of the church is that the bishops are elected from monks. In early centuries the monastic movements were very strong in the church but later they began to decline. In India monastic movements were not properly nurtured and promoted. As a result of that the number of celibate priests and monks are very few in the church. Therefore we have very few competent candidates to be elected as Metropolitans. This will lead to inefficient leadership and will negatively affect the development of the church.

*iii. Uneducated and Untrained Clergy*

From 1972 onwards the Jacobite Syrian church experienced a situation of emergency and war in the church. In hundreds of Parish churches under the Patriarchal faction especially in northern part Kerala there were not enough priests. The existing common theological seminary in Kottayam was taken over and came under the possession of the Catholicose faction. Therefore the Jacobite Syrian church was forced to ordain hundreds of priests without proper education and training. In 1975 a minor seminary was started and later in 1990 a Major Seminary with all modern facilities was established in Udayagiri, Vettickal, near Mulanthuruthy. Still many of the believers and parishes are not aware of the importance of theological education and priestly formation.

*iv. Democratic Set-up*

The administrative set up of the Syrian Orthodox Church is based on democratic principles. Democracy will succeed if disciplined and efficient persons and also people with Christian morals and character come forward to take up the leadership in the church. Quite often such persons are pushed aside and other selfish persons come forward to take up the leadership. We can never deny or set aside democracy, but the negative side of it cannot be ignored. Fully honouring the democratic set up, we have to strive for discipline and choose persons with efficiency and character.

*v. In sufficient Pastoral Care*

There are two reasons for insufficient pastoral care. Many of the

Parish churches of the Jacobite Syrian Church are very big having 2000 or 3000 families. Four or five priests engaged in such a parish can never personally know or take care of the numbers of the family. The second problem is lack of education and experience on the part of the clergy. The Priest also must feel himself as duty bound in the case of pastoral care. Because of inefficient pastoral care many of the believers are living as unknown and anonymous persons. It is an important problem that the church faces today.

### 3. Challenges

#### i. *Emergence of Splinter Groups and New Preachers*

A new phenomenon that all the Episcopal churches in the world faces today is the appearance of a lot of new splinter groups and new preachers. These new groups and new preachers speak quite often against the faith and traditions of the established Episcopal churches. The Situation of split and disunity in the Syrian Orthodox church in India is utilised and exploited by them. Through their house visits and propaganda a lot of people are put in chaos and confusion. If the concerned priests fail to give proper direction to those people they will fall in the hand of the new preachers. It is a challenge that the church is facing today and the church is now aware of this new situation and is trying to overcome the same.

#### ii. *Dropping out from the Communion of the Church*

Through the hard work of the splinter groups and new preachers a few believers have already gone out of the communion of the church. Some people secretly show sympathy to these groups and attend their meeting but still remain in the church. It is not only a challenge but also a threat to the church. More personal contact with the believers and classes on the faith and the traditions of the church are necessary to bring back those people to the church. Ignorance of many of the believers in their faith and traditions and in Bible is a weakness and this weakness is well exploited by the new groups and preachers. It is the duty of the church to take up the challenge and find some solution. Efficient pastoral care and periodical meditation and classes at Parish level are important means to face this challenge.

#### iii. *Lack of interest in Spiritual and Church Matters*

An average believer of the church goes to the church on Sundays sees the happenings in the church like a drama and comes back home.



He faces the monotony of repetitions and alienation. This happens because there is no active participation in the spiritual and ecclesiastical matters. To get real spiritual experience there must be dynamic involvement and participation. The splinter groups give opportunity to each member to speak, bear witness and to sing. The choir sets and musical instruments some time dominate eucharistic and liturgical prayers in the church and the majority of the believers are not allowed to open the mouth and they are made to remain as observers. Real and active participation is what is needed and expected.

#### *iv. No proper Youth Organization*

The youth today makes the church of tomorrow. Jacobite Syrian Youth Association is an important spiritual organisation of the church; they organise spiritual and charitable programs and activities. But the potential energy of the youth is not fully utilised for the benefit of the church and society. Many priests are afraid to get the youth involved in the affairs of the parish. The voice of youth must be heard and their progressive opinion has to be considered.

#### **Conclusion**

The Syrian Orthodox Church with its ancient traditions and rich heritage took root in India in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century itself. In the course of history the church has undergone severe prosecutions and suffered untold miseries. Yet it continues to uphold its faith fervently nurturing its distinct culture surmounting all hardships and tribulations. His Holiness the Patriarch of Antioch is its spiritual supreme head, His Beatitude the Catholics its crown, the Metropolitans and clergy its media of strength and heavenly grace, the Petrine throne and apostolic succession its blessings and the multitude of believers its treasure and all together form the giant edifice of the church. Just as the Holy remnant of Israel, the Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church in India remains strong steadfastly upholding the age-old faith and traditions of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church.

# **Malabar Independent Syrian Church : Heritage and Relevance Today**

**Joseph Mar Koorilose\***

## **General Introduction**

From a historical point of view it is a flow that, minor churches are projected as the minority with its dimensions lost in it's original set up by major churches. When Compared to the other major Branches of ancient Malankara Syrian Church (Malankara Sabha since the Coonen Cross Oath – in 1653) such as Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, Malankara Jacobite Syrian orthodox Church, Malabar Independent Syrian Church is small in its numerical strength. Still it is impossible to understand the history of the ancient, vibrant and highly significant Christian community in South India without being aware of this Malabar Independent Syrian Church and the crucial role it has played in that history .

The story of the ancient Syrian Community in India has fascinated writers and travellers down the centuries and consequently its history has been told many times. No attempt is made to repeat it in any detail here. Instead a basic sketch is presented, sufficient to enable an understanding of the context in which the Malabar Independent Syrian Church (MISC) came into existence . MISC came into being as a result of 'the confusions of the eighteenth century'. As Stephen Neill suggests in his book, 'A History of Christianity in India', 'this minute church has had an importance in the history of St: Thomas Christians far greater

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than its numbers would suggest'. This church was isolated from the cross currents of the ecclesiastical rivalries of other branches of the ancient Syrian community. Several avoidable and unavoidable elements came to play in the formation of a new sector or division or segment in the existing Main Church. It may be due to fresh insertion of faith and tradition or deviation from the main stream of identity. Or it may have happened by the struggle for power. But in the formation of Malabar Independent Syrian Church those elements have no role to play. This church is a part and parcel of the Oriental orthodox church that existed in India during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Now itself this first ancient division of Malankara Syrian Church retains the faith and tradition of Mother Church, Malankara Syrian Church.

### **Coonen Cross Oath and Events Leading to the Consecration Kattumangattu Abraham Mar Koorilose Metropolitan**

The high point of Portuguese interference was the bringing of the whole community under formal obedience to Rome at the Synod of Diamper in 1599. It was a triumph for Archbishop Menezes who engineered it, but a historical disaster in many ways, as Menezes considered the St: Thomas Christians heretical and ordered the destruction or alteration of all existing service books. A Latin hierarchy was imposed and Eastern bishops were prevented from reaching Kerala. After half a century a large section of the oppressed community publicly expressed their desire to be independent of foreign missionaries in general and the Jesuits in particular, by taking an oath at Mattanchery near Cochin while holding ropes tied to a stone cross in the churchyard. The incident took place in 1653 and is known as the Coonen Cross Oath. The summary of the oath was as follows: "We will not join hands with the Portuguese who have murdered the holy Syrian prelate, Athatholla. Neither will our future generations, nor we have anything to do with them and we will not accept Francis, the Roman Bishop as ours. We will consecrate our Archdeacon of Malankara as our native Bishop (Mar Thoma) in obedience to the letter of authority of Mar Ignatius of Antioch. All our ancient customs and traditions will remain unaltered and unstained. This oath is firmly taken by all assembled here."

Later, however, the majority of the congregation drifted back to Roman obedience. What remained in the Malankara Sabha was their good old Syrian faith, which they had obtained by hard labour and strong will while they were under the yoke of the Portuguese for 55 years.

Those who remained firmly opposed to Rome elected the Archdeacon Thomas as bishop and consecrated him by the laying - on of hands of twelve priests as Mar Thoma I.

They also sent various letters to Eastern Patriarchs asking them to send a Bishop. Meanwhile supersession of Portuguese power by the Dutch was happening in the political sphere of Kerala. At last in 1665 one Syrian Bishop (Jacobite) namely Mar Gregorios Abdul Jaleel (Susthaticon of that bishop is kept at our Thozhiyur MISC Library) arrived and He canonically consecrated Mar Thoma I. Both of them jointly consecrated Mar Thoma II. Mar Evaniose Hidayathulla, came to Malankara in 1686 consecrated Mar Thoma III and Mar Thoma IV. for Malankara Church. Then Mar Thoma V became Metropolitan with out proper Services of consecration. Famous historian Brown says: "It is possible that his appointment as Bishop consisted solely of the imposition of the mitre and handing over of the staff and ring at the hour of his predecessor's death. Mar Thoma Vth had to deal with unease about the validity of his orders among members of his own flock."<sup>1</sup> Any way at that time a foreign Bishop was not present in Malankara Syrian Church. In 1751 three foreign bishops from Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch were brought to Kerala at the request of Malankara Syrian Church, namely, Mar Basselios Sakralla, Mar Gregorios of Jerusalem, Mar Ivanios. Though these three Bishops arrived with the consent of Mar Thoma V, he did not co-operate with them. With out the co-operation of these Foreign Metropolitans and dishonouring their presence in Kerala Mar Thoma Vth consecrated his nephew as his successor Bishop, in 1761. People of Malankara church as well as a majority of priests became unhappy about this provoking action of Mar Thoma V. Both Mar Thoma V and his nephew, the new Bishop were eager to make alliance with Rome and unity with Pope during this time. It was against the spirit of Coonen Cross oath of 1653. Later in 1799 Mar Thoma VI celebrated Holy Qurbana at Thathampilly Roman Catholic Church by using *Patheera* ( Un-Leavened Bread )] At this juncture Mar Thoma V passed away in the year 1765. Then his nephew, newly consecrated Bishop assumed the position of Marthoma VI.

This perilous situation forced the foreign Metropolitans as well as the earnest devotees of Malankara church to find a stable spiritual leader

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1 L.W. Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, Cambridge, 1956, p. 133.



as Malankara Metropolitan to preserve and uphold the faith, traditions and values of Malankara Church. That is why Mar Koorilose Bava (full name Abraham Mar Koorilose Metropolitan from Kattumangattu family) entered the Ministry as the Malankara Metropolitan.

### **Mar Koorilose I Bava, Founder Archbishop of Malabar Independent Syrian Church**

With out understanding the boyhood days and the earlier life experience of a person we can not judge the personality of an individual impartially. Abraham Mar Koorilose I Bava, the founder Metropolitan of Malabar Independent Syrian Church and his brother Gheevarghese Mar Koorilose II belonged to a noble family of "Kattumangattu" from Mulamthuruthy near Cochin. The saintliness and glory of these two brothers and their sufferings in various ways cannot be easily erased from the pages of history of Christianity in India. Abraham George (Mar Koorilose I) the 5<sup>th</sup> son of Kattumangattu Abraham was born in 1730 . The 7<sup>th</sup> son GeeVerghese (Mar Koorilose II) was born in 1735. The forefathers of Kattumangattu Abraham had immigrated from Syria.

Both of them were keenly interested in church prayers and hymns from the very boyhood days. Mar Evanios of Basra was residing at Mulamthuruthy Church then. His Grace was much pleased with them and began to teach them Syriac and liturgy. Mar Evanios, by seeing the surprising taste of the two boys in the Syriac and prayers, ordained them as Deacons and before going back to his native place in 1751, ordained the two deacons as priests and entrusted them to teach deacons and other students at Mulamthuruthy Church. Thus Kattumangattu Abraham Malpan (Teacher Priest is called Malpan) flourished during the period of his priesthood. Later Kattumangattu Abraham Malpan was ordained Rambban by Sacralla Mar Basselios who died in 1753 .

As mentioned earlier, relationship with the Foreign Metropolitans and Mar Thoma V and his successor Mar Thoma VI who was his nephew was strained. At this juncture Mar Thoma Vth passed away in the year 1765. Then his nephew, who was already consecrated as Bishop assumed the position of Metropolitan. Marthoma VI moved closer to Roman catholic church to escape from the clutches of the Metropolitans, Mar Gregorios of Jerusalem and Mar Ivanios. People became dead against Marthoma VI because of his disobedience to

Mar Gregorios and Mar Ivanios in his assuming the title of Mar Thoma VI and his plan to join the Roman Catholic fold which was a serious departure from the established traditions of the Syrian Church since the COONEN CROSS OATH at Mattancherry near Cochin in 1653. The wavering mentality of Mar Thoma VI constrained Mar Gregorios of Jerusalem to seek a suitable candidate who would uphold the faith and traditions of Malankara Church. The choice fell upon Kattumangattu Abraham Rambban a scholar of syriac and popular among the faithful around Mulamthuruthy, the strong hold of Jacobites in those days and whom Sacralla Mar Basselios had ordained Rambban.

Mar Gregorios of Jerusalem consecrated Kattumangattu Abraham Rambban as the Metropolitan of Malankara Church in 1766 with the title Mar Koorilose. After his consecration Mar Koorilose was accepted by the faithful and priests who longed to uphold the traditions of ancient Malankara Church and well received officially in their churches at Mulamthuruthy, Kandanad and Karingachirs, well renowned ancient parishes of Malankara Church. Mar Koorilose obtained the support of Cochin Rajah and official ring for the Malankara Metropolitan was given to Mar Koorilose just after his enthronement as Malankara Metropolitan in the Eleseema Church near Mattancherry. The Raja of Cochin and Dutch East India Company approved Mar Koorilose as Malankara Metropolitan: These historical facts prove Mar Thoma VI had not been approved or accepted as Malankara Metropolitan either by the Cochin Rajah or by Dutch East India Company. The Royal proclamation, grand reception given to Mar Koorilose by people and His growing popularity made Mar Thoma VI uneasy. Since 1766 just after few months after the Valid Consecration of Mar Koorilose Bava, Mar Thoma VI triggered the fights against Mar Koorilose Bava. Trials and tribulations started. By the cunning cooperation with Karavattu Iypora Tharakan and his influence in Travancore Rajah, Marthoma VI played very bad role to influence the Rajah of Cochin. Mar Thoma VI also began to threaten Mar Koorilose Bava through the help of his servants. To escape from the enmity of Mar Thoma VI, Mar Koorilose I Bava accompanied by his brother Geeverghese Ramban fled to the wilderness of Thevanal forest surrounded by huge trees and mountains. According to a manuscript written by them, they fled to the forest hills of Thevanal on 10<sup>th</sup> may 1767 and built a small monastery (temporary chapel) there dedicated to

St. Behanan and lived there upto 1771. It means Mar Koorilose Bava with his brother Gheevarghese Rambban were living in the wilderness of Thevanal hills nearly five years.

### **Exile in Forest**

Mar Thoma VI thought that the enemy (Mar Kurilose I Bava) who had risen against him must be over thrown. He acted as an agent of the Pakalomattam reign. But since Mar Thoma VI was not on good terms with the Syrian prelates things were not easy. Threats were the first weapon wielded against the enemy (Mar Koorilose Bava) and as a result the Bavas had to go to the wilderness of Thevanal in 1767. They spent their time in fasting and prayers. They had transcribed several books during that life in wilderness. While cataloging the manuscripts written by them David Taylor of Birmingham university comments:

“The mental peace with prayers, expectation and hope in Lord with out fear of worldly confusions, super most concentration with deepest meditation are the elements, I understand from the beautiful scripts by hand writing of Kattumanghattu Mar Koorilose Bava and his brother. The limitations of the living situation has not affected the flow of writing with a spiritual mood”.

While they were camping at Thevanal, a dragon perching on a tall tree close by used to scream aloud and disturb their prayers. Geeverghese Ramban made up his mind to drive away this devilish creature. So he resorted to fasting and prayer. At last on the 41<sup>st</sup> day, the dragon fell down and disappeared with an astounding noise. The news of the fall of this monstrous dragon spread over the country side and Mar Koorilose thought that his cloistered existence would be publicised and endanger his safety at Thevanal. While in Thevanal Geeverghese Ramban had transcribed many books in syriac and this collection survives at Thozhiyur. The inscriptions in these books suggest that they had been in Thevanal for five years between 1767 –1771.

The Maharshis and Sanyasis of ancient India used to meditate in forests. But Mar Koorilose I and his brother were the only Christian prelates who lived in the Forest in the long history of Christianity in India. In stead of making efforts to gather people on their side to fight against the enemy, they were depending on Almighty God for better guidance.



## **A Painful Shock to Mar Koorilose Bava**

When they were leading a secret life of prayer in the forest Mar Gregorios of Jerusalem was getting more tired in his old age. Mar Koorilose Bava was unable to extend hospitality to Mar Gregorios due to his life in exile. During this sorrowful situation, pretending repentance in the former acts Marthoma VI knelt down in front of Mar Gregorios of Jerusalem with apology for his past disobedient actions and humbly requested for a re-consecration as official Metropolitan. With out grasping Marthoma VI's threats or traps to Mar Koorilose Bava, in the year 1770 Mar Gregorios of Jerusalem reconsecrated Marthoma VI, with the title MAR DIONYSIUS.

The cunning cooperation with Karavattu Iypora Tharakan and his influence on Travancore Rajah also were the elements in this dramatic Apology. Travancore Rajah gave official acceptance to reconsecrated Mar Dionysius. The interesting thing we have to note is that Mar Gregorios of Jerusalem had already consecrated Mar Koorilose Bava, as Metropolitan of Malankara Church in the year 1766. At the same time Mar Thoma VI (now Mar Dionysius) succeeded in influencing the Rajah of Cochin by his intimacy with Travancore Rajah through the unjust influence of a Steward namely Iypora Tharakan. The official reconsecration as Metroplitan by Mar Gregorios of Jerusalem paved the smooth path for the same. Rajah of Cochin was forced to take back the official ring from Mar Koorilose Bava, and then Mar Thoma VI got royal approval. At this juncture Mar Dionysius took Mar Koorilose Bava in custody, and Mar Koorilose Bava was ordered to live under the custody of Mar Dionysius. It was like a prison life and was a very sad situation for Mar Koorilose Bava .

## **Imprisonment**

As Rajah of Cochin withdrew his recognition of Mar Koorilose following representation from Marthoma VI, Mar Koorilose was summoned by Marthoma VI to Kandanad where he lived in effect as prisoner. Attempts were made to get Mar Koorilose to give up his Episcopal robe and staff and to celebrate the Holy Qurbana as a priest. Historians record that in the famous Jacobite church at Karingachira Mar Koorilose was living with a meagre allowance given by Mar Dionisius. He was tortured mentally and physically and even feared that his life was in danger. By giving up the Gold hand Cross and Episcopal

staff and precious silk dress to the guards who tried to torture Mar Koorilose, His Grace and brother escaped from their custody. As Marthoma VI intensified his hostile actions, the life of Mar Koorilose Bava and his brother Geevarghese Ramban was in danger. They planned to leave the territory of Cochin and Travancore. At that juncture Father Joseph Pulikkottil came to their rescue. He was from Kunnamkulam and was the beloved desciple of Mar Koorilose. He invited Mar Koorilose to Kunnamkulam. Accepting the invitation accompanied by Rev. Fr. Joseph (Ittoop), Mar Koorilose and his brother Geeverghese Ramban reached Kunnamkulam. Some writers say that they had escaped in a boat secretly.

### **Loneliness in a Private House**

Even though there were a number of churches Mar Koorilose and his brother Geeverghese Ramban could not live in any of these churches as these churches were under the control of Mar Dionysius. The priest, Fr. Joseph Pulikkottil, who took initiative to bring Mar Koorilose and his brother to Kunnamkulam was also a priest under Mar Dionysius; he could not arrange the stay of Holy fathers at his own house. So he arranged another house for their stay which belonged to Panakkal family. It is still kept intact. Kunnamkulam was also a small town of the erstwhile princely state of Cochin. As their life at Kunnamkulam was in danger they set out to Anjoor, a small interior village in Sout East Malabar. As Malabar was under the jurisdiction of another petty Royal Kingdom under the suzerainty of British they settled at Anjoor. There they established a small temporary chapel made out of Bampoo mats in the name of Mar Bahnan. On the way to Anjoor, some farmers of Katakambal, a near by village, complained about the pests which were doing much harm for the crops. Mar Koorilose said special prayers for them and they were saved from the harm caused by the pests. In gratitude, the farmers of Katakambal celebrate the memory of Geeverghese Mar Koorilose, the younger of the two Metropolitans on May 29, the day of his demise, even today.

### **Llife at Anjoor and Establishing St. George Cathedral at Thozhiyur**

While the holy fathers were residing at Anjoor in the temporary Chapel, the only son of a prominent Muslim family of Hydrose Moopan, a chieftain of the local Punathur Raja, was bitten by a mad dog and

contracted rabies. The local people (mostly Muslims) brought the boy to the Holy Fathers. Mar Koorilose prayed for the boy and gave the boy a pill soaked in his tears. The boy was instantly cured from the illness. The Muslim chief in his gratitude gave a large area of coconut grove in the village of Thozhiyoor, (adjacent to Anjoor village) to the Bishop and it was there the St. George Cathedral was founded. Two adjacent villages in the west coast, Anjoor and Thozhiyoor were under the British rule. With the financial help from the Muslim chief, the St. George Church was built by the Holy Father Mar Koorilose I. This St. George Cathedral church later became the headquarters of Malabar Independent Syrian church. So Kattumangat Abraham Mar Koorilose Metropolitan (Mar Koorilose I) became the venerable founder of a new church in the history of christianity. Mar Koorilose I seems to have maintained cordial relations with syrian priests in the vicinity. Thozhiyoor tradition states that a number of syrian families joined Mar Koorilose I as well as some priests near by. In the long run of the early history of MISC, priests from Malankara Church especially from the nearest parish Arthat were friendly with Mar Koorilose I and his Successors. Four priests from Arthat church were called to Thozhiyoor for consecration as Metropolitans namely Mar Philoxenos I and Mar Philoxenos II Mar Koorilose III and Mar Koorilose IV. Later priests of Arthat and Thozhiyoor were jointly officiating in church services till 1862. An interesting result of Kattumanghatt Abraham Mar Koorilose's flight to British Malabar is that the British Authorities authorised the Thozhiyur Bishops to maintain two body guards as a special privilege. In 1794 Mar Koorilose I consecrated his brother Geeverghese Ramban as Mar Koorilose II On July 10<sup>th</sup> 1802. Mar Koorilose I Bava was called back to the holy kingdom of God at the age of 72. In the year 1972, second centenary of MISC, the church canonically declared Abraham Mar Koorilose Bava a saint.

## **Mar Koorilose II**

Mar Koorilose I consecrated his brother Geeverghese Ramban as Mar Koorilose II. The new bishop was a man of prayer and seldom moved outside the church. He consecrated Joseph Kasesa of Kaniapilli to be his successor under the title Mar Ivanios. After a few months however, Mar Ivanios died. Mar Koorilose II therefore consecrated Skariah Kaseesa from Pengamuck as Mar Philoxenos I in 1807. Then, due to ill health he left for his native village in Mulanthuruthy, approximately 15 miles east of cochin, where he died on 29 May 1808.



### **What was the real Sacrifice?**

If Kattumangattu Abraham Mar Koorilose Bava had not been consecrated as the Metropolitan in ancient Malankara Church, history of the present Orthodox Churches in India might have been different. Mar Koorilose Bava was a strong check in the way of Mar Thoma VI to make the Malankara Syrian Church Roman Catholic. Roman Catholic authority also became aware of another fact that if Mar Thoma VI joined the Roman Catholic way, Priests and people of the ancient Malankara Syrian Church would be united under the spiritual leadership of Mar Koorilose Bava. For the survival of the Ancient Malankara Syrian Church, the trials and tribulations and torments were God's plans in the life of Mar Koorilose Bava. Considering all these facts we can conclude that Abraham Mar Koorilose Bava has played a prominent role for the ancient Malankara Syrian Church to preserve its faith and tradition. Most Rev. Dr. Alexander Marthoma Metropolitan wrote 'Eventhough the first Metropolitan of M.I.S. Church, Mar Koorilose I, intended to live a quiet life in Thozhiyur, undisturbed by the authorities of the neighbouring native State of Cochin, his life of deep devotion and piety attracted many to him...Mar Koorilose I had no intention to form a separate Church. He had close relationships with the Arthat Church at Kunnamkulam in Cochin state just three miles from Thozhiyur where he stayed'.

### **Why this church is called Independent?**

Kattumangat Abraham Mar Koorilose Bava established this church not for any personal gain, not because of any difference of opinion. But only because he was forced to leave the mother church. By the Grace of Almighty God, Holy Prelates were accommodated at Thozhiyur Cathedral by means of a donation of a Muslim Chieftain. Mar Koorilose Bava was upholding the original Malankara Church tradition. He and his successors had no grudge towards the mother church. This is evident from the fact that the Bishops of Thozhiyoor had consecrated three bishops to the mother church in 1815, 1817 and 1825, Pulikkottil Mar Dionysios II (Fr. Joseph Pulikkottil), Punnathra Mar Dionysios III (Fr. George), Cheppat Mar Dionysios IV (Fr. Philipose). Though Mar Koorilose I was dethroned from the position of Malankara Metropolitan, his fourth successor Geevarghese Mar Philoxenos II was proclaimed as Malankara Metropolitan and occupied the position of Malankara Metropolitan twice. When similar crisis arose for Thozhiyur Throne,

Cheppat Mar Dionysios IV came to Thozhiyur and consecrated Koothoor Geevarghese Mar Koorilose III in 1829. Similarly priests of Arthat church had been selected and consecrated as Bishops of Thozhiyoor till 1856. This also shows both the people and clergy never considered Thozhiyoor church as a separate one. This friendship continued till 1856.

In 1856 Alathur Panakkal Joseph Mar Koorilose was consecrated as the Metropolitan of Thozhiyoor. Youyakim Mar Coorilose, a delegate of Patriarch had claimed that he would consecrate the Bishop of Anjoor (Thozhiyur). Mathews Mar Athanasius, who authorised Malankara Metropolitan, also contended that he had the authority to consecrate a bishop to the Thozhiyoor Church. People of Thozhiyoor wanted Mar Athanasius to consecrate the bishop. With the legal civil administrative support Mathews Mar Athanasius, Malankara Metropolitan consecrated Alathur Panakkal Joseph Mar Koorilose. This led to a prolonged civil suit between the Patriarchal delegate and the Alathur Panakkal Joseph Mar Koorilose IV of Thozhiyoor. Finally in 1863 the Madras High court decreed in favour of Joseph Mar Koorilose IV. Madras High court ruled that "the Thozhiyoor church was an Independent syrian Church in Malabar and that neither the Patriarch of Antioch nor his delegate, Youyakim Marcoorilose had any authority over the Thozhiyoor church". Here after the Thozhiyoor church began to be known as Malabar Independent Syrian Church. With this verdict the friendly relation of Thozhiyoor church with Malankara church (Mother Church) came to an end and they began to view the MISC, as a separate church.

### **Malabar Independent Syrian Church - Architect for the World-Wide Ecumenism**

When Malankara Marthoma syrian Church (reformed division of Malankara Church) became a widow with out a Metropolitan on the Demise of Thomas Mar Athanasios in 1893, by the request of the Malankara Marthoma Syrian Church, reformed group, Metropolitan Joseph Mar Athanasios and Saffragan Metropolitan Geeverghese Mar Koorilose of the MISC went to Kottayam Cheriya pally to consecrate Titus I in 1894. Though MISC extended Spiritual hand for episcopacy to Malankara Marthoma church once in 1894, the Malankara Marthoma Church extended the same episcopal helping hand to MISC for five Metropolitans including the present writer. Now also Malankara Marthoma church is maintaining the position of Sister church with MISC.

Primary lessons of Ecumenism was practised by this church many years ago. One major misunderstanding must be clarified here: It was not the MISC that first sought the helping hand for Episcopal Consecration from the Malankara Marthoma Syrian Church, but it was they who made the appeal to Thozhiyur Bishops to consecrate their Metropolitan. Later in the year 1935 only Marthoma Metropolitan, H.G. Abraham Marthoma consecrated Kuriakose Mar Koorilose Metropolitan of Thozhiyur Church.

### **Devotion of Parumala Thirumeni towards Kattumangat Metropolitans**

Proclaimed Saint of Malankara Church, Geevarghese Mar Gregorios of Parumala who was also from Mulamthuruthy had a high veneration for the late Mar Koorilose I & his brother Geeverghese Mar Koorilose II. During his reign as Metropolitan after one century of Mar Koorilose's demise Mar Gregorios of Parumala attempted to rebuild the Chapel of Mar Bahanan at Thevanal. It is a fact that if Mar Gregorios of Parumala had not taken the initiative for the reconstruction of the Chapel of Mar Bahanan at Thevanal, the place of exile of Mar Koorilose I & his brother Geeverghese Ramban might have been missed from the history. Parumala Mar Gregorios Metropolitan of the Orthodox Church was fully attracted to the saintly life of Mar Koorilose I and II. Through out his life as a priest Mar Gregorios of Parumala spent a lot of time at vettickal dayara. After getting consecrated as Metropolitan with five others, he spent the first days in prayer and meditation at the tomb of Koorilose II and conducted his first holy Qurbana there. The only importance of vettickal dayara is that the tomb of Mar Koorilose II is situated there.

### **Serious Misunderstanding**

So the lame accusation against Mar Kurilose was that he received ordination without the permission of Mar Dyanesius. This was only a meaningless accusation and never a historical fact. But this accusation was not heard at the time of the ordination of Pulikkottil Joseph Mar Dyanesius I, in 1815 by Thozhiyur Bishop during the reign of MarThoma VIII. It was similar to the ordination of Abraham Mar Kurilose. The Malankara Church authorities were taking double standard and their attitude to Mar Kurilose was step motherly. Bishop Pulikkottil was approved and Mar Kurilose could not be approved. Nobody knew the 'why' of it. Mar Kurilose was seen as an enemy and he was banished

from his own land, whereas Mar Pulikkottil was accepted reverently like 'Abhimanue' for saving the Pakalomattom Family.

### **Was the 'Crime' of Kattumangattu Bishops so Unpardonable?**

'To err is human and to forgive is divine.' Repentance had solved many excesses in Malankara Sabha. They came from outside the Pakalomattom family and they were ordained with the approval of many priests and laymen. This was the only 'crime' they committed. Is there no absolution for that 'crime'? Similar incidents had taken place in the church history. The 'Thathampilly incident' of 1799 and the 'Ittoop Kathanar incident at Chela' are examples. In both cases there was fining and accepting them to the fold. Forgiveness is the essence of Christianity. Jesus has taught us to forget and forgive. He taught us to love even our enemies. But it seems strange why the Malankara Sabha failed to find a solution in the case of Mar Kurilose. Most of his valuable possessions were taken away from him and still the whole affair remains unpardoned.

### **The Worship, Manuscripts and other Artefacts**

The Orthodoxy of the faith and worship of the 'Malabar Independent Syrian Church' has never been in doubt and it was attested by all Orthodox Groups. 'In matters of faith, sacraments, forms of worship and practices it follows the Orthodox tradition' affirmed K. N. Daniel as recently as 1986. 'This church is strictly following the Antiochene liturgical traditions' states G. Chediath. Codrington has described them in some detail and part III of Brown's book comprises a description of the rites as practised. A point of potential significance for liturgical scholars, is the way in which, because of its isolation, the 'Malabar Independent Syrian Church' has preserved a number of apparently ancient features which have been altered in the larger West Syrian rite Churches in Kerala. Another area in which the 'Malabar Independent Syrian Church' may prove to be of significance to the world of scholarship is in the manuscripts it possesses. Various artefacts of interest are also preserved at Thozhiyur such as A hand cross given by Mar Gregorios of Jerusalem to Mar Koorilose I, a special chair in which bishops are seated during their consecration, two types of Palanquin etc .

### **Conclusion**

Every thing seems to be predetermined by God. There must be ordination of Bishops and it should continue uninterrupted and this small



Church in Kerala may be instrumental in the ordination. 'Thozhiyoor Sabha' thus acts to keep the lamp burning, ordaining three Bishops for the Malankara church in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and one bishop to Mar Thoma Syrian Church at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For these and other reasons the story of this Indian Syrian Church deserves to be widely known. The history of the 'Malabar Independent Syrian Church' enabled to bridge 'the reformed' / 'unreformed' divide which arose in the nineteenth century. Both sides of the divide are indebted to the 'Malabar Independent Syrian Church' for the provision of bishops at moments of crisis in their histories. The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church still trains its ordinands in the Seminary founded by a Metropolitan consecrated by Mar Philoxenos II of Thozhiyur. The Mar Thoma Syrian Church would almost certainly not exist in the form in which it does today without the intervention of Mar Athanasios I of Thozhiyur and his suffragan in 1894. The Syrian Orthodox faith in its Indian expression is lived and celebrated without interruption or diminution in the 'Malabar Independent Syrian Church', notwithstanding the fact that since 1935 its bishops have been consecrated by \_ and have themselves helped to consecrate 'the reformed' Mar Thoma Metropolitans. This unique pattern of relationships provides a context from which Metropolitans of the 'Malabar Independent Syrian Church' might one day make a crucial contribution to the healing of a division. As the Indian Church re discovers confidence in its own traditions and becomes more critical in its adoption of western ways and assumptions, the authentic preservation of the Indian Syrian heritage in the 'Malabar Independent Syrian Church' could prove a valuable asset. Yet the the 'Malabar Independent Syrian Church' is not simply a museum-piece. It is a living community which takes for granted the assumption that its leaders should be men of prayer and that God will act in response to such prayer. Such an attitude, coupled with a holding together of relevant outreach and the best of the tradition, suggests that this small member of the Universal Church will continue to be used by God in the years to come.

# The Mar Thoma Church: Historical Heritage and Challenges

M. J. Joseph\*

## Mar Thoma Identity: Is it 'Strange'?

A few years ago, I read an article on the self-hood of the Syrian Churches in Kerala. The writer was a Roman Catholic Theologian who was struggling hard to describe 'the identity' of the Mar Thoma Church. What he wrote is quite interesting. He used the words of Isaac to Jacob in describing the Mar Thoma Identity. *The voice of Mar Thoma Church is Protestant, but the hands are the hands of the Syrian Church.*! "For him, Mar Thoma Church has a dual identity! The other story is taken from my reply to a foreigner who asked me: "What exactly is the difference between the Mar Thoma and other Syrian Churches? I replied to him in a humorous way. "We all live under the same roof having different kitchens, but we do not eat in the same dining hall but only in the verandahs! He was quite amused. In November 1998, the Mar Thoma Church gave a reception to the members of the CCA General Committee at Tiruvalla. While felicitating the hosts, Dr. Feliciano Carino, then General Secretary of CCA repeatedly described the Mar Thoma Church as "**a strange Church**". Church historians like Dr. Kaj Baago too had problem to pigeon-hole the Mar Thoma Church under the accepted traditions of Churches. Dr. Bago writes: "The Mar Thoma Church is a

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strange combination of Catholicism and Protestantism, of conservatism and radicalism, of traditionalism in worship and revivalism in preaching". All the Churches know a little about the tension between tradition and reformation, between Catholicism and Protestantism. But I know of no other Church in the world where the tension is greater than in the Mar Thoma Church". However, in this tension or rather in the ability to comprehend both the Orthodox tradition and the Protestant message the Mar Thoma Church has its significance for the future of the Church in India. The intrinsic tension in its cultural ethos and spirituality should enable the Church to rise above traditional boundaries.

### **Ecumenical Vision and Openness**

The two big umbrellas of ecumenism are classical ecumenism and contemporary ecumenism. In the post-modern period of the mission of the Church, contemporary ecumenism has taken over the lead in the search for the identity of the Churches. The Lima document of the *Faith and Order* has shown a paradigm shift from a purely theological to a missiological identity of the Churches. The paradigm shift is a new awakening in the life of all the Churches today. The mission of the Church is to create a community of communities which is possible only through a re-interpretation of the traditional attributes of the Churches—One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. According to Prof. A. P. Nirmal, in the new theological paradigm, we should speak of not oneness, but plurality of Churches, not holiness, but justiceness of Churches, not catholicity but contextuality of Churches, and not apostolicity, but priesthood of Churches. This means that in our search for identity and integration, there should be openness to discover new mission paradigms for relationship in God's world. The legacy of the Mar Thoma Church is to be sought in this direction.

### **Ripples and Waves of Reformation in the Malankara Church**

Palakunnathu Abraham Malpan, the Luther of the East (1796-1845), hails from Maramon, a village in Central Travancore. He was the moving spirit behind the movement of reformation in the Malankara Church in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Having received spiritual fervour and dynamism from the Anglican Mission of Help, Abraham Malpan, assisted by Kaithayil Geevarghese Malpan (1800-1855) of Puthupally stood firm to eradicate all kinds of abuses and vices and then sought to restore the former

pristine purity and faith of the Syrian Church. It was indeed a beacon call. He felt the need for reformation for three reasons: i) his study of the Word of God ii) his association with the missionaries and their evangelical emphasis and iii) the decadence of the practices of the Church.. The reformers- Abraham Malpan and Kaithayil Geevarghese Malpan- took bold steps in revising the liturgy and translating the same into the vernacular, eliminating auricular confession, prayer for the dead, invocation of the Virgin Mary and the Saints etc. It was indeed a revolt against the practices in the Church. It is to be remembered that he did not discard the eastern theology to adopt a Protestant theology.

### **Reformation -Questions and Answers**

The then Metropolitan, Chepat Mar Dionysius, was not prepared to accept the changes advocated by the reformers. He excommunicated Abraham Malpan who afterwards returned to his mother parish at Maramon and stood firm in his faith and convictions. It was indeed great that the whole parish stood by him. Some of the deacons whom he taught at the Old Seminary, Kottayam followed him faithfully.

Abraham Malpan realized that there was a need for a bishop favouring reformation, if he had to take his reform movement to a logical conclusion. He decided to send his nephew Deacon Mathew to Mardin in Syria where the patriarch of Antioch resided. The Patriarch ordained him as priest first and then consecrated him as Metropolitan with the name Mathews Mar Athanasius. Mathews Mar Athanasius got the Royal Proclamation in 1852 declaring him as the Metropolitan of the Malankara Church. The Metropolitan consecrated Abraham Malpan's son, as Thomas Mar Athanasius in 1868. Thence follows the geneology of Bishops and Metropolitans in the reformed group of the Syrian Church which is now known as the Mar Thoma Syrian Church.

### **Faith and Practices**

The faith of the Mar Thoma Church is embodied in its Eastern moorings, but rooted in the biblical faith. The Church accepts the Holy Bible consisting of the 66 books of the Old and the New Testaments as the basis for all matters relating to doctrine and faith and the Nicene Creed (A.D.325) formulated in accordance with the Holy Scriptures. The Church affirms that the people of God are sent to all the world (the peoples of God) and that they are called upon to participate in the



*oikonomia* ( the divine plan) of God which is geared to “unite all things in Christ”. The practices of the Church are to be understood in the wider framework of Reformation in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Unfortunately there is no serious thinking to go beyond the past. The Church, while adhering to its Eastern ethos, gives expression to its worship, liturgy, festivals, Feasts and fasts and other practices for fulfilling her mission to the global community.

### **In Pursuit of Spiritual Ethos**

In the Eastern Churches, its articles of faith are not systematically formulated. Its orders of worship and other sacraments speak for themselves as the basic theology of the Church. In our attempt to understand the faith and practices of the Church we need to delve deep in to the Bible, Sacraments, Church history and Traditions which throw a flood of light on matters of faith. The very nature of the Church speaks of the need for corporate worship. Creed, Code and Cult constitute the three basic elements of a religious community. Just as white and yoke are protected in an egg under the cover of a shell, the faith of the Churches is preserved under the umbrella of its rituals and ceremonies. The task before us is to go beyond the garb of religion to its spirituality. The future of humankind depends upon its adherence to its spirituality which should take us beyond the age old boundaries and practices of religion and its cult. The challenge before us is to search for the buckle that binds and the hyphen that unites the terrestrial and the celestial .

The liturgy of the early Church seems to have been patterned after the form of Jewish synagogue- worship. The Eucharist or the Holy *Qurbana* (offering) remains the centrality of Christian faith. In the Mar Thoma Church, the St. James liturgy of the Syrian Church is being used for the Eucharistic celebration. A few changes have been made in the liturgy during the reformation period. But the structure and ethos of the liturgy remains the same. The Eucharistic liturgy used in the Mar Thoma Church reminds the faithful of their calling to give thanks to God for the gift of creation and to break themselves for others to reveal God’s glory. The Eucharistic act reminds the faithful of creating authentic social relationships in a spirit of mutual love, care and sharing. The Baptismal rite is indeed an act of incorporation into the dying and rising of Christ as a sign of discipleship.

The Church recognizes 7 sacraments and they are: i) Baptism, (mamodisa) ii) Confirmation (moron) iii) Confession iv) Holy Qurbana v) Marriage vi) Ordination vii) (Extreme unction) anointing of the sick. Of these seven, Holy Baptism and Holy Qurbana are called Dominical Sacraments. In the Mar Thoma Church, confirmation follows baptism and confession precedes Holy Qurbana. Among the sacraments, only confession and holy *Qurbana* are repeated. Marriage, ordination and unction are optional sacraments.

### **A Look at the St. James Liturgy**

St. James Liturgy used in the Mar Thoma Church is considered to be the most ancient and venerable of the Antiochean group of liturgies. It comes from the Church in Jerusalem and is connected with the Fourth century rite of Jerusalem. The prayers are full of idioms, images and symbols which are taken mainly from the Bible. The ecological dimension of the liturgy is also to be taken into account when prayers are addressed to God, the Father who is the creator of all that is visible and invisible. The predominant notes in the liturgy is joy and praise to God for the gift of life. The prayers evoke congregational response. The gestures of priests and the laity are indeed forms of communication in a spirit of humility before God. The symbols such as kiss of peace, bowing of heads, the reverence paid to the eucharistic elements, the signing of the cross etc. are integral to the liturgical acts. The sacred vessels and vestments used in the liturgy have symbolic meanings. The splendour of the liturgy fills the people's heart with awe and a sense of unity among the people.

The use of lighted candles, and incense have symbolic meanings. The practice of the giving of kiss of peace is a universal symbol of love and reconciliation in the Eastern liturgies. The very life of the Christian is an act of togetherness in fellowship. The passing down of peace from the altar to the worshippers shows that the origin of peace is from God through the symbolic act of *kayyassori*.

### **Festivals, Feasts and Lent - Call to Spiritual Renewal**

The constitution of the Church insists that the festivals, feasts and lent are not to be removed and that Sunday is to be observed. Different feast days and lent are to be followed commemorating the important events in the life of the Lord. They are called *Maranaya Perunalukal*.

*Danaha* (Epiphany), Feast of Annunciation, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter commemorating the important events in the Holy Week, the day of ascension, Pentecost, and the day of transfiguration are the important feasts observed in the Church

During the conduct of the Holy Eucharist and other sacraments, the priest wears the *kappa* which has a symbolic meaning. The bishops of the Church at all times wear on their head *masnapsa* (hood) which shows that the bishop is a monk. All bishops in the eastern tradition are chosen from among the monks. In the Mar Thoma Church priests are allowed to marry. In its ecclesial polity, episcopacy and democracy are uniquely blended.

The practices are meant to speak to the heart, mind and intellect in diverse ways. Hence faith and practices are integrally related in the life and mission of the Church. The rituals and symbols are not end in themselves. They serve a purpose. They are meant to enhance and promote the quality of life among the faithful.

### **Maramon Convention-Celebration of Relationships**

The historic Maramon convention (established 1895) held annually by the Church is indeed a celebration of relationships in the community under the WORD OF GOD. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Marmon Convention is an effective tool of the Church to use the preaching of The Word of God for personal and social repentance and transformation.

The Maramon Convention is also to be regarded as the cradle of Ecumenism. Ecumenism today is not to be confined to the unity of the Churches but also to the unity of all creation (humankind)). Maramon convention even before the establishment of the World Council of Churches in 1948 began to appreciate the best in the traditions of other Churches. Right from 1895 onwards the Mar Thoma Evangelistic Association initiated a great movement of Christian unity through the communication of the Word of God. Eminent speakers like T. Walker, Sadhu Sunder Singh, Dr. Kagawa, Dr. Bob Peirc, Dr Paul Rees, Dr. Stanley Jones and several other preachers were invited to share the Word of God with people of different Churches and religions. The boundary of the Church was kept open to all. The Church was primarily concerned with the celebration of the Word in affirming the universal

truths of the gospel. As the World wants to speak the language of the gospel, love, compassion, reconciliation and hope – the communication of the gospel message by word of mouth is important. The focus of the message is to affirm life for all in the name of Christ as Jesus proclaimed in the Lord's prayer. "Let your Kingdom come on Earth as it is in heaven". As Ecumenism is a vision beyond one's own geographical and cultural boundaries, the celebration of the Word of God through God's servants has made the Church rich in its heritage. However, the time has come for the Church to look for innovative methods to communicate the message of the gospel.

There are several fixed features in the agenda of the Maramon convention. It is desirable to arrange a session for inter-faith meeting for the sake of communal harmony. Matters concerning human rights, justice and peace issues, ecology and faith should find a place in the preaching. To listen to a religious leader other than a Christian preacher at Maramon will create a platform for social amity. There are several common issues which require spiritual response from people of other religions. No doubt that Maramon convention carries great potential as an effective platform for enhancing religious and cultural harmony.

### **A Chronological Glimpse of the early history of the St. Thomas Church <sup>1</sup>**

( A.D. 52 – 1895 )

**The Mar Thoma Church shares the St.Thomas Tradition of the Syrian Christians in Kerala with regard to the founding of the Church by St.Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus.**

- A.D. 52: St. Thomas establishes the Church in India.
- A.D.189: Pantaneus, a missionary from Alexandria visits Kerala, thus marking the Beginning of contacts of this small independent Church with the outside World.
- A.D.345 The first wave of immigration from Persia led by Thomas of Cana.

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1. Indebted to Parish Directory – 2004, The Bangalore East Mar Thoma Church. Compiled by Koshy Mathew.



- A.D.825. The second wave of immigration from Persia led by Marwan Sabrison. During the first fifteen centuries the Syrian Church entered into cordial relationships with the Alexandrian and Persian Churches.
- 1498 Vasco de Gamma arrives in Goa, marking the beginning of the Church's exposure to the Roman Catholic traditions.
- 1599 Alexis de Menezes, the then Archbishop of Goa, convenes the Synod of Diamper at Udayamperoor, south of Ernakulam, and coerced the Syrian Church to accept the Roman doctrines and practices.
- 1653 The Church shook off the shackles of ecclesiastical slavery and ascertained its freedom and autonomous nature by taking an oath called 'Crooked Cross (*koonen kurissu*) Oath'.
- c.1655 Mar Thoma I consecrated by Antiochean Prelate thus inaugurating the connection of the Syrian Church with the Jacobite Church of Antioch.
- 1816-1817 1816-1817 Missionaries of the 'Mission of Help' from the Anglican Church (popularly known as the 'Kottayam Trio' – Joseph Fenn, Benjamin Baily and Henry Baker) arrive in India and make invaluable contributions in the fields of evangelism, theology, education, Bible translation and printing, thus sowing the seeds of the Reformation movement in the Syrian Church.
- mid-18<sup>th</sup> century: The Reformation movement gathers momentum with Mathews Mar Athanasius and Thomas Mar Athanasius playing a leading role in the path reformation.
- 1877: Mathews Mar Athanasius passes away and Thomas Mar Athanasius leads in the struggle of the Reformed party in keeping possession of the Old Seminary, where both bishops were professors.
- 1889: The Royal Court of Appeal in Trivandrum decrees that the faction owing allegiance to the Patriarch of Antioch as the rightful heirs of the Old Seminary and Thomas Mar Athanasius leaves the Seminary, leaving all his belongings

there because he held fast to the autonomy of the Church.

1893: Thomas Mar Athanasius passes away and Titus I Mar Thoma is consecrated Metropolitan of Malankara Mar Thoma Church.

1895: The first Convention of reformed believers takes place on the shores of Pampa River in Maramon.

### **Mar Thoma Church - Institutional framework**

Head Quarters- Thiruvalla

Metropolitan-The Most Rev.Dr.Philipose Mar Chrysostom

Suffragan Metropolitan-Rt.Rev.Dr.Joseph Mar Irenaeus

No.of Parishes-1075

No.of Priests-668 (active service);119-retired (as on May 2003)

Members-9 lakhs (approx)

Representative Assembly (Church Parliament)-1350 members

No.of dioceses-11

### **Organizations:**

a) Mar Thoma Evangelistic Association

b) Mar Thoma Sunday School Samajam

c) Mar Thoma Yuvajana Sakhyam(Youth Dept)

d) Mar Thoma Suvishesha Sevika Sanghom (Women's Fellowship)

e) Mar Thoma Voluntary Evangelists Association

f) Depart of Sacred Music and Communications

### **Quest for Ecclesial Unity**

The St. Thomas Christians had always lived in relationship with other Christians down the centuries. The nature of their relationship varies from time to time. In its early period, the relationship with the Roman Church, the Syrian, the Antiochean and the Nestorian Churches had brought dividends and moments of agony.

The Mar Thoma Church of today is an ecumenical Church. The legacy of reformation in the Malankara Church in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century reinforced its ecumenical character. The relationship of the Mar Thoma

Church and the Independent Thozhiyoor Church has Episcopal and spiritual links. The Section 21 of the Constitution of the Thozhiyoor Church speaks of it in vivid terms.

The reformation in the Malankara Church has brought the Mar Thoma Church into close relationship with the Anglican Church of the World Communion. The Concordat signed between the Anglican and the Mar Thoma Church in 1961 maintains a deep relationship at the pastoral and ecclesial level. The visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury to Kerala in 1986 and his participation in the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the reformation in the Malankara Church was indeed a significant mile stone in the ecumenical relationship between the two Churches. The existing cord of relationship has been extended to the Anglican Churches in USA, Canada and Australia. This ecclesial tie has in a way contributed to the emergence of its relationship with the CSI and the CNI first through a joint Council in 1978 and then through a declaration under the name, **Communion of Churches in India** (CCI). The joint mission initiatives in various parts of India, the observance of a unity Sunday in November (second Sunday every year) and the use of a common lectionary etc. are signs of larger relationship among the Churches. However, the autonomy of each Church with its administrative structure and liturgical ethos has been permitted to continue as a visible form of diversity in the body of Church. The pluralistic context of India makes it all the more possible.

The Mar Thoma Church has also initiated bi-lateral conversations. The dialogue with the Lutheran Churches (UELC) in India is in progress. The search for a relationship with the other family members of the Syrian Churches in Kerala has assumed several unofficial forms through study groups, KCC, NCCI, WCC and the Bible Society of India. It is important to note that the Mar Thoma Church is a partner with the Orthodox Churches in the administration of the Union Christian College, Alwaye. The establishment of the Federated Faculty for Research and Culture in Kerala (FFRRC) (1980) is a form of institutional unity among the theological fraternity of the Orthodox, Mar Thoma and CSI theological institutions in Kerala. The writer served as its secretary (1978-1980), then as its first Registrar (1980-1986) and Chairman (1989-91). The model of unity initiated among the three above institutions has been also followed

in other places in India. The FFRRC model is a fellowship of theologians and students (post-graduate level of learning (M.Th & D.Th) under the wider umbrella of the Senate of Serampore University.

The Mar Thoma Church maintains its relationship with ecumenical bodies in the world through its various ways. It produced several ecumenical leaders who served the world community. Ever since the inception of the World Council of Churches (WCC, 1948), the Mar Thoma Church is an active member of it. Mention be made of ecumenical personalities like late Dr. Juhanon Mar Thoma Metropolitan (Former President of the WCC), late Dr. Thomas Mar Athanasius (member Faith and Order Commission, WCC) late Dr. M.M. Thomas (former moderator of the Central Committee-WCC), late Dr. M.A. Thomas (Founder Director, ECC), Dr. Zacharias Mar Theophilus (currently member central committee of the WCC), Dr. Joseph Mar Irenaeus (Vice-president, CCA), Dr. M.J. Joseph (Former member faith and Order Commission, WCC and currently Director, ECC), Dr. Abraham Kuruvilla, (Former member Faith & Order Commission), Dr. Ipe Joseph (General Secretary NCCI Dr. A.P. Athyal (General Secretary CCI)) and lay persons like late Prof. C.P. Mathew, late Mr. T.K. Thomas, late Dr. T.V. Philip, Dr. Mathews George Chunakkara (currently Executive Secretary WCC & formerly with CCA) are only a few well known in the Ecumenical circles for their contributions.

The Church has also made remarkable contributions in the Ecumenical bodies like the Bible Society, NMS, CLS, CASA, YMCA, ECLOF, CARD, STARD etc. by lending the services of its personnel as and when the need arises.

### **Challenges today**

A challenge is meant to respond creatively. The church has to recognize that it has now become a global Church and that her people are called to respond to social and cultural issues in a responsible manner. The spirit of reformation has to be continued in all respects. There is no point in adhering blindly to the early tenets of faith on which Abraham Malpan initiated reformation in the Church. In matters of faith and practices, the Mar Thoma Church will be able to contribute much to the global Church if the spirit of openness is made alive.



As a result of the Diasphoric advancement of the Church, it has to grapple with the question of the relationship between gospel and culture in different diasphoric contexts. The relevance of the traditional liturgy, inherited and traditional ethos of piety and other religious practices have raised umpteen questions for which answers have to be found. The politicization of the structures of the church and institutionalism have made the witness of the Church less relevant in many ways. The reformation spirit of the Church is not quite evident today when crucial decisions are made in matters of faith and order.

The resurgence of the laity and the larger representation of women in the administrative bodies are signs of growth in the polity of the Church. However, the matter regarding the ordination of women is still in the stage of debate.

There is an awakening among the youth of the Church. The department of Youth ministry (Mar Thoma *Yuvajana Sakhyam*) has taken various measures to meet with the challenges. The Sunday school department has also given serious thought to give a relevant and meaningful ministry to the children. A large segment of the Mar Thoma population in North America, Canada U.K., Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and gulf countries needs the support and guidance of the Mother Church through its pastoral ministry.

I am afraid ,the institutionalism in the Church has taken over the spirituality of the people at large. The tension between democracy and episcopacy is quite evident in the annual meeting of the Sabha Pradinidhi Mandalam (Church Parliament).The leadership potential of the bishops, the clergy and the lay people is quite promising for the future of the Church.

# The Assyrian Church of the East in India

## Identity and Challenges

**Mar Aprem Metropolitan\***

The Assyrian Church of the East in India is locally known as the Chaldean Syrian Church. Outside India the name Chaldean Church refers to that branch of the Church of the East which has a separate existence since 1553 AD when Pope consecrated a monk named Sulaqa as the Patriarch of the Chaldeans of Babel. The head of Chaldean Church is Patriarch Mar Emmanuel III Delli who resides in Baghdad. The Catholicos Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East is His Holiness Khanania Mar Dinkha IV who resides in Chicago where a lot of Assyrians from Iran and Iraq have migrated during the 20th Century.

In order to get a glimpse into the identity and challenges of the Assyrian Church of the East in India it is necessary to understand the complicated history of this Church in Trichur. It is a St. Thomas Christian community. It is a remnant of the pre-Portuguese Christian community of Kerala. It is under the Persian Church. Even the bishops of the Church were from the Mesopotamia until the present writer occupied the post of the Metropolitan in Trichur in 1968. There is no history of any bishop being consecrated in India.

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\* The Author **Mar Aprem** is the present Metropolitan of the Assyrian Church of the East in Trichur. He was the President of the Church History Association of India during 1976 - 1982. His first doctorate thesis was **The Study of History, Faith and Worship of the Chaldean Syrian Church in Trichur since 1814** for which D.Th. was awarded by the University of Serampore, India, and his second Doctorate for the Ph.D. in the Syriac Department of Mahatma Gandhi University was **The History of the Assyrian Church of the East in the twentieth Century** with special reference to the Syriac literature in Kerala.

The Chaldean Syrian Church in India is based in Trichur, Kerala. The history of this Church in the early centuries is the same as the history of the other Syrian Churches in Kerala. From the arrival of St. Thomas till the Oath at Coonen Cross in January 1653 the history of the Indian Church is common.

### **Portuguese Domination**

The Portuguese set up their headquarters in Goa early in the 16th century and extended their domain to Kerala. The Archbishopric of Goa, backed by the Portuguese, claimed jurisdiction over the Syrian Christians of Malabar. The East Syrian liturgy and the Mesopotamian connection of the St. Thomas Christians laid them open to the suspicion of Nestorianism and Archbishop Menezes of Goa, who arrived in Kerala in December 1598 was designated to bring them into the Latin way of worship.

He convened a Synod at Udayamperur in June 1599. Many decrees of the Synod were aimed at bringing the Syrian liturgy and practices into conformity with those of the Latin Rite. The Syrians and their leader "Archdeacon" George who were present at the Synod, had to acquiesce in these decisions. The last of the Mesopotamian Bishops died 2 years before the Synod, and for 40 years after it the Syrians were placed under Jesuit Bishops. Even before the Synod, the Portuguese clergy had tried to impose their customs on the St. Thomas Christians. After the Synod they tried to lord it over them and there was a crisis of confidence.

### **Syrian Revolt**

When Archdeacon George died in 1637 his nephew Thomas assumed leadership, and a spirit of revolt seized the Syrians. The revolt came in 1653 after the arrival in India of a Mesopotamian bishop, Ahatalla. Thousands of Syrians gathered near Cochin, demanding that they should see the bishop, but the Portuguese sent him off to Goa and news spread that he was drowned in the sea. The angry Syrians then and there swore an oath that they would never again to be under the "Paulists" (i.e. Jesuit Bishops and teachers in St. Paul Seminary). "Coonen Cross oath" (as this incident came to be called) was a protest against Latinization and a defiant plea for the Syriac Rite.

Four months after this, they declared their leader Thomas, their Bishop after 12 priests had laid their hands on his head. Some efforts were subsequently made by Rome through the Carmelites to heal this breach. And during the next 12 years 84 Syrian congregations returned to communion with Rome while 32 congregations remained loyal to "Bishop" Thomas.

After the revolt at the Coonen Cross in Mattanchery, Cochin in January 1653 AD some Syrian Christians of Malabar accepted Mar Gregorius Abdul Jaleel of Jerusalem who arrived in Kerala in a Dutch ship in 1665. Soon after the oath at the Coonen Cross the Syrian Christians who revolted against the oppressive measures of the Portuguese were looking for a bishop of the Syrian tradition. Although Mar Gregorius Abdul Jaleel belonged to the West Syrian Church, the Syrian Christians who took the Coonan Cross oath accepted Mar Gregorius.

Thus a large section of the Syrian Christians of Kerala became a West Syrian Church, known as the Jacobite Syrian Church at that time. There were difficulties for the Syrian bishops to arrive in India. Goa was under the control of the Portuguese. They favoured only Catholics. The Portuguese did not allow even the Chaldean Catholic bishops to come to India.

Bishop Joseph Sulaqa, brother of the first Chaldean Catholic Patriarch Mar Yohannan Sulaqa, arrived in India in 1556, one year after the murder of Patriarch Sulaqa. Mar Joseph was not allowed to work in India. He was sent to Rome to have his faith examined.

The Details of his death are not known to history. He is believed to have been buried in Rome. His burial place has not been traced yet. Fortunately the Syriac prayer books he took with him to Rome are preserved in Rome. Many of the prayer books used in India at that time were burned in the Synod of Diamper of 1599 AD. Only 4 manuscripts of the period prior to 1599 AD are known to exist today in India. One of them is a *Kashkul* copied in 1585 AD at Kothamangalam by an Indian priest. This manuscript is preserved in the Metropolitan's Palace, Trichur.

This situation was changed after the Dutch defeated the Portuguese in 1655 AD. The Dutch were willing to bring to India the Syrian bishops. Taking advantage of that situation Mar Gregorius of Jerusalem arrived in Kerala. Many Christians in India accepted a Syrian bishop without



knowing much about the difference between West Syrians and East Syrians.

The Syrian Christians around Angamalee who did not accept Mar Gregorius waited for East Syrian bishops as before. Mar Gabriel came in 1701. He died in Kerala in 1731 and was buried in Cheriapally in Kottayam, which is under the control of the Indian Orthodox Syrian Church.

In the 19th century two bishops came to India, They resided in Trichur church that was built in 1814. The Chaldean Patriarch Mar Joseph Audo sent two bishops. Mar Thoma Rokos came in 1861 and was sent away in 1862. Mar Yohanon Elia Mellus reached Trichur in 1874 and was compelled to leave in 1882.

Since Mar Thoma Rokos had come to India without the permission of the Propaganda of Rome Fr.Kuriakose Elias Chavara corresponded with Rome to find out whether Mar Thoma Rokos had permission from Rome to go to India. When he got replies that Mar Thoma Rokos had no permission to travel to India Fr.Kuriakose Chavara used all his influence to send Mar Thoma Rokos back to Mosul. He succeeded in his effort. But the people in Trichur did not surrender. They waited for another bishop from the Patriarch to show up in the Indian shore. That was Mar Elia Mellus in 1874.

Most people in India never knew the difference between the Chaldean Patriarch and the so-called Nestorian or Assyrian Patriarch. Those who knew the difference must have thought that a bishop from a Chaldean Patriarch is a "lesser evil" than a Bishop sent by the Pope without the blessings of a Patriarch.

Since Patriarch Mar Joseph Audo, the Chaldean Patriarch, was not on good terms with the Pope at that time, he sent Mar Elia Mellus to prevent the Roman Catholic interference in the Chaldean Syrian community in Trichur. The Trichur Church is referred to as the Mellusian Church by some Roman Catholic scholars. Such title is not known to the members of this Church. This Church is some times known in Trichur as Surayi church.

The name Mellusian Church is used in the sense that this church was a schism created by Mar Elia Mellus who came to Trichur from

Mosul in 1874 AD. Fr.Nidhiyirikal Mani Kathanar was the vicar in Kuruvilangad. The young priest used his influence to suppress the Mellusian group. Actually Mar Elia Mellus got several parishes under him to support him and to oppose the Roman Catholics. As there were no Syro-Malabar hierarchy at that time, all Roman Catholics in India were under the Latin bishops. Mar Elia Mellus was an educated Metropolitan. He managed to obtain the loyalty of many Christians not only in Cochin state, but also in Travancore state such as Kuruvilangad. In 1874 to 1882 he stayed in the Church in Trichur and gave leadership. Fr.Nidhiry Mani did his best to oppose Mar Mellus. Mar Mellus appointed two native Vicar Generals. One was Mar Abdisho Thondanat who was working as a simple priest in Travancore near Bharaniganam. The other was Fr. Mathai Maryam who later left Trichur. He returned to Travancore, worked and died a Catholic.

Mar Abdisho Thondanat Metropolitan was consecrated by the Assyrian Patriarch Mar Ruwel Shimun in Mar Shallita Cathedral in Qudshanis, Kurdistan in 1862 after the return of Mar Thoma Rocos to the Middle East. Priest Anthony Thondanat had approached the Chaldean Patriarch Mar Joseph Audo, consecrator of Mar Thoma Rocos, to consecrate him as a metropolitan. The Latin authorities in Mosul did not permit the Patriarch to consecrate a bishop for India.

That is the reason why he went to the mountains of Kurdistan, north of Mosul and requested Mar Ruwel Shimun Patriarch to consecrate him. Priest Anthony was consecrated bishop and assumed the name Mar Abdisho in Mar Shallitha Cathedral in Kochanes (spelt Qudshanis).

After his return to Palai in Travancore in 1863 he had difficult days including his work as a priest in the Catholic Church near Palai. He came to Trichur in the old Cochin state in 1874 and worked under Mar Elia Mellus in Trichur. After Mar Elia Mellus left India in 1882 Mar Abdisho Thondanat went to work in Elamthottam church near Palai. When he lost the church case in Elamthottam he came to Trichur and died there in November 1900. The tomb of Thondanatta is in Trichur.

Bishop Adolph Medlycott, the first Vicar Apostolic appointed by the Pope for the Trichur vicariate in 1887, filed a suit in 1888 for the possession of the church in Trichur. Bishop Medlycott made an arrangement with the Latin Church and exchanged his small chapel

with the Lourdes church that is the cathedral for the Syro-Malabar Church in Trichur since then. Bishop did not succeed in this suit. During the time of his successor Bishop John Menachery, the appeal on the suit of Bishop Medlycott was decided against him.

The Trichur church people immediately sent a memorandum to Mar Benyamin Shimun Patriarch (1903 - 1918) to send a Metropolitan to Trichur, as Mar Abdisho Thondanat, consecrated by his predecessor Mar Ruwel Shimun had died in November 1900. The Assyrian Patriarch promised to send a Metropolitan to India. The Archbishop of Canterbury helped the Patriarch to send a Metropolitan to India.

Mar Abimalek Timotheus Metropolitan, born on August 28, 1878, arrived in Trichur on 27 February 1908. He was an Assyrian from Mar Bisho village in Turkey. After reaching Trichur he spoke against the use of images on the altar of the Mart Mariam Church, Trichur. Some leaders turned against the young Metropolitan Mar Timotheus. A suit was filed by Michael Augustine cor-episcopa against the Metropolitan whom he helped to bring to India. In this suit the supporters of Michael Augustine cor-episcopa argued that the Trichur Christians were independent of the Patriarch as well as the Pope. Mar Abimalek Timotheus won this suit. The "Award" of the Political Agent to the Travancore and Cochin governments, Mr. C.W.E. Cotton pronounced in April 1925 finally settled this suit started in 1911.A.D.

After the Cotton's Award the Church in Trichur removed all the statues from the altar. The name of the Church was removed from Vyakula Mathavin Church to Mart Mariam valiapally. Those Independents who lost the suit built a new Vyakulamathavin Church, known as Puthanpally, now known as the Basilica, which is the biggest church in India. Some of the statues removed from the church were burned. Some statues are still hidden in this church.

The most beautiful statue of Madonna was burned in the church premises in November 1951 that created enmity between these communities. Later the relationship gradually improved. Mar Abimalek Timotheus Metropolitan died in Trichur on 30 April 1945. There was a period of seven years without any bishop. In June 1952 Mar Thoma Darmo Metropolitan came to Trichur and assumed the duties of the head of the church of the East in India. He was from Eyyal village near

Mar Bisho from where his predecessor had arrived. Actually Deacon Mansur Elisha Darmo was ordained deacon in Baquba refugee camp near Baghdad after the First World War, in 1921. He was working as deacon in Syria in 1951 when he was recommended by Mar Yosip Khananisho Metropolitan (1893 to 1977) to go to America to be promoted and posted to India. Mar Thoma Darmo was appointed to that post by Mar Eshai Shimun Patriarch, nephew of Mar Benyamin Shimun Patriarch, who had sent Mar Timotheus Metropolitan to India. During the rule of Metropolitan Mar Thoma Darmo the Church in India made significant progress. But difference of opinion developed on the issue of the hereditary succession in the Patriarchal and Episcopal families. The Patriarch suspended the Metropolitan on 10 January 1964.

The Church was split into two groups namely Patriarchal group and the Metropolitan group. Both groups were united again in November 1995 under the leadership of His Holiness Khanania Mar Dinkha IV, Catholicos Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East now residing in Morton Grove, near Chicago, USA. The old calendar group accepted the Gregorian calendar. The Patriarchal group had already adopted it in 1964. By mutual consent the bishops and clergy of the Church of the East in India showed an example to other churches.

### **Ecumenical Contacts**

The present Catholicos Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East His Holiness Mar Khanania Dinkha IV was consecrated in Ealing near London, England on 17 October 1976. The consecration ceremony was in the Anglican Church of St. Barnabas in Ealing near London, England<sup>1</sup>. The majority of the Assyrians who migrated to England live in the Ealing area. The Assyrians had no church of their own in England at that time. The first Assyrian Church in England is the Mart Mariam Church in Hanwell, near London, consecrated by the present Patriarch H.H. Mar Dinkha IV on 15th August 1987.

The Catholicos Patriarch Mar Khanania Dinkha IV (born in Darbandoki in Northern Iraq on 15 September 1935), who had been the bishop of the Assyrian Church in Iran since 11 February 1962, had abundant

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1 His predecessor Mar Eshai Shimun (1908 - 1975) was consecrated Patriarch in the Baquba Refugee camp near Baghdad, Iraq in 1920.



ecumenical experience. Over a century the Assyrian church was very close to the Church of England. Archbishop Benson of Canterbury had established the Archbishop of Canterbury's Mission to the Assyrians in June 1886. After the First World War of 1914-18 the mission in the Kurdistan ceased to function. Still some old missionaries like the Rev.W.A.Wigram continued their friendship with the Assyrian Church of the East and its leadership. The present Catholicos Patriarch Mar Khanania Dinkha IV was present at the enthronement of the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr.George Carey.

The Anglicans were interested in establishing inter communion with the Assyrian Church of the East. Referring to the Lambeth Conference of 1908 AD Bishop Christopher Hill quotes from the speech of Bishop John Wordsworth of Salisbury,<sup>2</sup>:

The separated Churches of the East have never been properly treated, if treated at all, by this conference, they have been scarcely noticed as existing, and yet they open a field most opportune. I should say, and the most ready of access of any field outside the English - speaking races, they are large bodies and very kindly disposed bodies.....the Assyrian Church, for which I wish specially to plead, has about 100,000 or 120,000 souls in Assyria, as well as a small branch in Cochin. Now inter-communion with all these bodies would be perfectly easy, if we could only get over the fact of their formal heresy... the heresy of Nestorianism attributed to the Assyrians.

Dr. J.F. Coakley, senior lecturer in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization at Harvard University, rightly points out the fact that we owe a debt to the pioneers like the Rev.George Percy Badger (1815-88)<sup>3</sup> and to Rev. William Ainger Wigram (1873-1953)<sup>4</sup>, both Anglican clergymen who had worked among the Assyrian Christians

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2 John Wordsworth in W.A. Wigram's Doctrinal Position Of The Assyrian Or East Syrian Church, London, 1908, p.56 (quoted from Microfilm 10075, Reel 3, ITEM 37, The British Library, London).

3 Dr.J.F. Coakley believes that the Rev. George Badger was "the first to make a serious case that its doctrine was not, from a Catholic point of view, heretical.

4 Rev.W.A. Wigram was the most energetic worker of his day in the cause of theological understanding between the Church of the East and the Church of the West.

and laid "some of the intellectual ground work" for the present theological agreement. Coakley comments:<sup>5</sup>

Wigram's reference to the Church of England calls attention to the fact that he was an Anglican; and within the Anglican communion there was the opportunity to put his conclusions about doctrinal agreement into practice. Provision for inter communion with the Church of the East was finally ratified on the Anglican side by the Lambeth Conference of 1920. As the "Common Christological Declaration" reminds us, on the Roman Catholic view the sharing of communion is appropriate only at a later stage in the ecumenical process.

Referring to the content of the Common Christological Declaration, and the contribution of W. A. Wigram in that direction Coakley opines:<sup>6</sup>

Wigram proposed that some formula of belief should be found to which both sides could assent. This would be more positive and definite than arguments about what false doctrine the Assyrians did not believe. Wigram's choice (among several which he discussed with the Patriarch and other leaders) was the so-called Formulary of Reunion of 433 between the bishops of Antioch and Alexandria. This opened with the words: 'we confess Our Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, the only begotten, perfect God and perfect man, of a rational soul and a body; begotten of his Father according to his Godhead before the ages, but in the last days, for us and for our salvation, of the Virgin Mary; consubstantial with the Father as touching his Godhead and consubstantial with us touching his manhood; for there was a union of the two natures; therefore we confess one Christ, one Son, one Lord'. This is the same kind of text with much of the same vocabulary that we have in the "Common Christological Declaration".

After the Lambeth Conference of 1920, the Assyrians were more concerned about finding a homeland or some refugee camps for those who had fled from Turkey. Thus the theological discussions did not

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5 J.F. Coakley, *Voice From the East*, Chicago, January - April, 1999, p.5.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

have any priority. The last Lambeth Conferences in 1988 as well as in 1998 did receive official delegate of the Assyrian Church of the East.<sup>7</sup> But the Church of the East did not show much interest to develop an official relationship with the Church of England.

The Assyrian Church of the East in recent decades believes that it finds more comfortable ties with the Roman Catholic Church rather than Anglicans who have women priests. A decision of the Lambeth Conference of 1988 permits even lady bishops.

### **Signing of the Common Christological Declaration**

In 1978 Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV attended the installation of Pope John Paul II in Vatican. On November 7 to 9, 1984 Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV made an official visit to Vatican. As a result of this meeting it was decided to have official dialogue with the Vatican. There were five meetings in the following ten years. As a result the Common Christological Declaration was signed by Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV and Pope John Paul II. It was an important ecumenical news welcomed by many churches. There were similar agreements between the Vatican and the Coptic Orthodox Church in 1973, Syrian Orthodox Church in 1984 and Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church in 1990. The Pope and the Patriarch concluded their Common Christological Declaration with the following practical and positive note.<sup>8</sup>

Living by this faith and these sacraments, it follows as a consequence that the particular Catholic churches and the particular Assyrian churches can recognize each other as sister Churches. To be full and entire, communion presupposes the unanimity concerning the content of the faith, the sacraments and the constitution of the Church. Since this unanimity for which we aim has not yet been attained, we cannot unfortunately celebrate together the Eucharist, which is the sign of the ecclesial communion already fully restored. Nevertheless, the deep spiritual communion in the faith and the mutual trust already existing between our Churches entitle

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7 Archdeacon Yonan Y. Yonan of London. The Old Calendar group was represented by Mar Aprem in 1988.

8 Full text of the Common Christological Declaration is given as Appendix 2 in this dissertation.

us from now on to consider witnessing together to the Gospel message and co-operating in particular pastoral situations, including especially the areas of catechesis and the formation of future priests.

In thanking God for having made us rediscover what already unites us in the faith and the sacraments, we pledge ourselves to do every thing possible to dispel the obstacles of the past which still prevent the attainment of full communion between our two Churches, so that we can better respond to the Lord's call for the unity of his own, a unity which has of course to be expressed visibly. To overcome these obstacles, we now establish a Mixed Committee for theological dialogue between the Catholic and the Assyrian Church of the East.

As a result of the signing of the Common Christological Declaration a Mixed Committee for Theological Dialogue was appointed by the two Churches. The MCTD has met nine times since 1995. The meeting that took place in Arezzo near Florence, Italy on 12-14, October, 2000 changed the name of Mixed Committee for Theological Dialogue (MCTD) into Joint Committee for Theological Dialogue (JCTD). The JCTD as well as the different departments of Vatican have approved in 2002 a statement on Sacramental life prepared by this committee. The Holy Synod summoned to meet in Chicago on August 23 - 31 is expected to give final approval for the signing. If the Holy Synod of Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV approves it, His Holiness is expected to travel to Vatican for a ceremonial signing of this statement along with Pope John Paul.

### **Mar Narsai Press**

The significant contribution of the Church of the East in India as far as the Syriac literature is concerned, is two-fold. The first is the preservation of over 80 Syriac Manuscripts; some of them go back to the period prior to Synod of Diamper of 1599 AD. In spite of the persecutions and the burning of the Syriac books it is surprising that the Church of the East is able to preserve for posterity some valuable Syriac Manuscripts. All Syriac books in the 16th century in India were manuscripts, as there were no printed books at that time.

Attention was drawn to these Syriac manuscripts at Trichur through a paper presented in the 3rd Syriac Symposium held at Goslar, Germany in 1980. Ever since it is published the Syriac scholars have visited Trichur



to refer to these Manuscripts. As the climate is not good in India for the safety of the Manuscripts, the Central European University, Budapest, Hungary along with SEERI, Kottayam undertook to copy all these manuscripts into CD ROM and make it available to the scholarly world. The project, which began by February 2000 AD, is completed.

The second significant contribution of this Church in Trichur is in the field of printing the rare Syriac books. The Archbishop of Canterbury's Assyrian Mission had established a Mission Press in which several Syriac books were printed. The American Presbyterian Mission also had printed some books.

The First World War (1914-18) made both the English and the American Missions close their operations among the Assyrians. This made it necessary to start a printing Press in Iraq or in India. As a matter of fact in 1924 an Assyrian Mission Press was started by the efforts of Deacon Joseph Kellaita (later made priest in 1927). The same scholar was responsible for starting the Mar Narsai Press in 1926 in Trichur.

Joseph Kellaita was a Syriac scholar. He belonged to the Kellaita family (distant cousin) of Mar Abimalek Timotheus Metropolitan of Malabar and India. Mar Timotheus who visited Iraq in 1919 and in 1920 to help the settlement of the Assyrian refugees who were in the Baquba camp near Baghdad brought Deacon Joseph Kellaita to Trichur. He spent nearly two years in Trichur writing the Syriac types for the smiths and carpenters to make the 'mould' for casting the metal types for printing. Around 1922 or so Deacon Joseph Kellaita took all the types (fonts) he had prepared in Trichur to Mosul in Iraq to start a printing Press in Iraq. Mar Timotheus Metropolitan was not disappointed. He worked for another set of the similar Syriac types and started in 1926 AD, Mar Narsai Press in the building adjacent to the clergy quarters at the Marth Mariam Church.<sup>9</sup>

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9 It was one year after Marth Mariam Big Church was handed over to Mar Timotheus Metropolitan as the Court Receivers had to leave after the 'Award' of Mr. C.W.E. Cotton, British Political Agent to states of Travancore and Cochin.

Mar Narsai Press, Trichur printed many Syriac books. During 1929 - 1933 a brilliant Syriac student of Rev. Joseph Kellaita namely Deacon Benjamin Geevarghese of Ashitha came from Mosul and assisted in the Syriac printing as well as in teaching students Syriac language. Isaac Simon, a bearded layman from Mosul, helped Mar Timotheus to print some books. Mar Timotheus had plans to print Hudra, the prayer book for evening and morning prayers. But he could not find time and resources to undertake such a heavy work.

Hudra was printed during 1960 -1962 by Mar Thoma Darmo, who was Metropolitan in India during 1952 - 68. This was the first time the Assyrian Church of the East printed the precious prayer book. Up to this time some Churches were using the Chaldean (Catholic) Hudra edited by Paul Bedjan and published in Leipzig, Germany. Now throughout the Church of the East, whether in Iraq or in Australia the name of the town of Thrissur (old English spelling is Trichur) is known by all the Assyrians because *Hudra*, *Qurbana Thaksa*, Burial books, Marriage books, *D'Qdam Vadvathar*, Blessing of the House (*Boorakh Bathe*), *Thurgame*, etc. are printed at Mar Narsai Press.

At present some of these books are not available at Mar Narsai Press. A reprint of Hudra (3 volumes) was made in 1993 by Mar Narsai Press. It was printed at Ebenezer Press in Trichur; as Mar Narsai Press had not bought offset machine, it is difficult to find type setters in Syriac, so Mar Narsai Press is not printing new books. As it has an offset machine now, it is possible to reprint the existing books. It is also planning to print Syriac books after composing the matter by Computer, as Syriac fonts are available. But there are no Assyrians in India. Even the Indians who have learned this language know only lishana atieqa (old language) which is used in the liturgy. The modern spoken Assyrian is slightly different.

### **Liturgy and Life**

The Church of the East in India is using the Liturgy of Addai and Mari. There are two alternate anaphoras. Counting the Addai and Mari as the first anaphora, the second is known as that of Theodore of Mopsuestia (d.428). This is used on Sundays from the Advent season till after the Psalm Sunday. Theodore of Mopsuestia, the Interpreter, wrote this anaphora. This anaphora was translated from Greek into

Syriac by Mar Awa Catholicos on the occasion of his visit to the Roman Empire, with the help of Mar Thoma, the teacher of Urhai.

From Holy Saturday till the beginning of Advent the first anaphora of Addai and Mari is used. The third anaphora is that of Nestorius. This is slightly longer than the first two anaphora. This third anaphora is used on five occasions namely Epiphany, Memorial of Mar Yohannan Mamdhana, Memorial of Greek Malpans, The Wednesday of the Ba'utha of the Ninevites and Maundy Thursday.

The liturgy has been translated into Malayalam. Most portions of the liturgy are used in the Malayalam translation for the benefit of the worshippers. However most priests recite some prayers in the original Aramaic language. The text of the liturgy is printed with two languages.

### **Theological Position**

This church accepts all the decisions of the first two ecumenical councils namely, council of Nicea in 325 AD and the council of Constantinople in 381 AD. As for the third ecumenical council that was held in 431 AD at Ephesus the Church of the East opposed it because it was stage-managed by Cyril of Alexandria, arch rival of Nestorius of Constantinople. Even now Patriarch Schenuda of the Coptic Orthodox Church, successor of Cyril of Alexandria, is opposed to any ecumenical contact with the Church of the East.

On other theological issues there is no serious difference with other Eastern or ancient churches.

### **Statistics**

Parishes; 28 (23 in Kerala and 5 in other states (Coimbatore, Madras, Bangalore, Bombay and Delhi).

Mission parish. One (Kottayam)

Priests: 43

Deacons 32

Sub deacons 2

Deaconesses 2

Nuns 3

The members 30,000

## Present Situation

Mar Aprem is the head of the Church as Metropolitan of all India. Mar Timotheus Metropolitan was the Patriarchal Delegate. He died after completing 80 years of age on August 6, 2001. The Assyrian Church of the East has passed a decree in their Holy Synod held in Sydney, Australia in 1994 suggesting the prelates to retire at the age of 75.

The nine Central Trustees, elected every three years, carry on the administration and the Representative Council is elected by all men and women above the age of 21. All vicars of the parishes are ex-officio members. The metropolitan nominates ten percent of the number of the elected members of the Representative council. At present there are 141 members. Each parish has a parish council and two kaikars elected for three years at the same time as the Central Trustees.

There is an active Youths Association for young men for the age group of 18- 45. Young girls join the Mahila Samajam( ladies society). In July 2004 an ad hoc committee began functioning to form a Youths Association(ladies wing)to make the younger women active in the church after their age of Sunday school studies. There is an evangelistic association and active prayer groups. There is a bi-monthly magazine entitled Voice of the East in English. The Malayalam monthly is called *Pourasthia nadam*.

The Chaldean Syrian Church of the East has taken membership in the Kerala Council of Churches as well as in the National Council of Churches in 1970. It is also a member of the Church's Auxiliary for Social Action known as CASA. These organizations belong to the non-Catholic churches in India. This Church took membership in the Christian Medical College and Council, Vellore in 1977. This gives them sponsoring privilege in the famous Christian Medical College, Vellore, Tamilnadu.

The majority of the priests are married. The Metropolitan or bishops are selected from among the celibate clergy. Monastic order as much is not in practice in the Church of the East in recent history.

In 1968 when the present Metropolitan took charge he developed cordial relations with the Syro Malabar Church. Bishop George Alappat had been consecrated in 1944 and had begun to improve the relationship with this Church. He met with Mar Abimalek Timotheus Metropolitan



and discussed with him issues of common concern such as the schools. But before that new relationship began to bear fruit, Mar Abimalek Timotheus Metropolitan passed away on 30 April 1945. Bishop Alappat wrote a condolence message in which he stated that he had arranged for Mar Timotheus to stay for summer in Yercaud in Tamil Nadu, a Catholic place. Perhaps if Mar Abimalek Timotheus Metropolitan had lived longer the relationship between the Syro Malabar Church and the Chaldean Church would have improved.

During the seven years from 1945 to 1952, there was no bishop for the Chaldean Syrians in Trichur. The co-operation between these communities did not improve during that time. During the period of Mar Thoma Darmo from June 1952 to 1968 the relationship did not improve. Mar George Alappat was happy to meet Mar Aprem and try to improve the relationship between these two communities. In 1970 when Joseph Kundukulam was consecrated bishop of Trichur, Mar Aprem was there. The cordial relations continued with the present archbishop Mar Jacob Thoomkuzhy. Mar Aprem was there at the consecration of the auxiliary bishop of Trichur Mar Andrews Thazhath on 1 May 2004.

Although some priests and members are active in the Ecumenical group and its activities in Trichur, there is some mistrust among its people. The Chaldean Syrians of Trichur complain that the Catholics are forcing our boys to join the Catholic Church when they marry Catholic girls. Some Syro Malabar priests insist that the Chaldean boys have to give an undertaking in writing with reliable people as witnesses stating that they would not go back to their original Church. After the marriage some of these believers break their promise.

On the other hand when the Orthodox or Mar Thoma girls are married to our boys, our boys have the freedom to remain in the Church of their origin where they have grown up. Personally the Chaldean boys want to remain in the Church of their family. But there is no permission from the Catholic Church to do that.

Therefore the present writer who is co-chairman of the Vatican-Assyrian Theological Dialogue Committee has requested that some solution ought to be found whereby the boys of the Chaldean Church are allowed to remain in their Church. It is hoped that the statement on

the Sacramental life will be signed by Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV and Pope John Paul II in September 2004.

Although the Metropolitan of the Chaldean Syrian Church is a speaker in many of the meetings arranged by the Catholic churches in the Archdiocese of Trichur and in the diocese of Irinjalakuda, all members of the Chaldean Church do not show such warm relationship with the Syro Malabar Church. One cause of this hatred is that the Syro Malabar Church is much larger Church than the Chaldean Syrians there is a suspicion that the Chaldean Syrians will be the losers in the long run.

### **The Church constitution**

In 1953 the Chaldean Syrian Church in Trichur introduced a constitution. Mar Thoma Darmo Metropolitan gave the impression to the people that this constitution was approved by the Patriarch. But later it came to be known that there was no approval from the Patriarch for this constitution. Nevertheless during the long litigation from 1962 to 1995 the civil suits approved the constitution, as it was the only constitution applicable to both groups. During the unity between the two groups of Patriarchal group and the Metropolitan group on 13 November 1995 it was decided to write a new constitution. This was approved by Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV in 1997. Therefore any amendment to this constitution will be possible only after the approval of the Patriarch.

In Conclusion, it must be observed that the litigations was a curse of this community from 1888 beginning with the litigation filed by Bishop A.E. Medlycott. The last litigation was between two groups within the community.

The history proclaims the missionary past of this Church. It is an admitted fact this Church known as the Nestorian Church went to China in 635 AD and to Japan in the 8th century etc. A church which was described as a Church on Fire by John Stewart, a Protestant writer of the last generation, is not doing any missionary work today. The spirit of missionary zeal should be re-kindled, if this church has to be proud of its past. The early missionaries who went to China, Ceylon, Japan etc were the members of this church from Persia. It is not clear whether the members of the Indian branch of this Church were among these

missionaries. The missionary activities carried on by the nuns and priests of the Syro Malabar Church today should be an example to all of us.

Bible study and witness have been included in the prayer groups of this church. But the Church as such is not showing much interest. It does not pursue such spiritual activities vigorously. As a result some of their members are attracted to the Pentecostal groups.

The Church needs more educated clergy to carry its ministry. Although small in size compared to many other Churches, it continues its witness as an ancient church. It has faced several challenges in the past. One can wish that this Church will be capable of facing the challenges of the third millennium making its mark in a non- Christian world.

# Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

## Historical Self-Understanding and Identity

K. M. George\*

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, together with all churches belonging to the *Nazarani* Christian community of Kerala, traces its origin to the work of St Thomas, the Apostle of Christ, who is believed to have arrived at the ancient seaport of Kodungalloor (Cranganore) on the Malabar coast in CE 52. In writing about the history and identity of the ancient Christian community in India one has to deal with the figure of St Thomas both historically and symbolically. While most historians of the west in the colonial period doubted the authenticity of the St Thomas story, the Christian community in Kerala clung to it as part of its most sacred and cherished tradition. Here one has to look critically at the dominant historiography as developed in the European west and as applied to the non-western world in order to grapple with the issue of early Christianity in India.

In this brief article I shall mention the major historical landmarks in the life of the Malankara Orthodox Church and point out some of the key methodological problems we confront in retelling our history and defining our identity. This is done in an ecumenical spirit remembering that the ancient Christian community in India was one body, one family and one church until the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16<sup>th</sup> century who came as traders and as missionaries of the Roman Church but

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soon became colonial and ecclesiastical overlords. With their occupation of this ancient Eastern Church started a series of unfortunate divisions that plague us till to day. The present writer fervently hopes that the lost unity of the St Thomas Christians would be restored in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Name and Family**

The name of the church appears in formal documents as *Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church* under the *Catholicate of the East*. The Catholicos, the head of the Church now resides at the headquarters of the Church at Devalokam, Kottayam, Kerala, India. (The present Catholicos is *His Holiness Baselios Mar Thoma Mathews II*. The title *Mar Thoma* meaning *St Thomas* appears formally with the name of every Catholicos in order to signify the apostolic succession and the continuity of the apostolic seat from Thomas the Apostle of Christ.)

The Church is variously and popularly referred to as *Malankara Sabha* in Malayalam, as *The Indian Orthodox Church* by some of its historians, as the *Syrian Church* in some non-Christian circles, as the *Jacobite Church* by the indiscriminating members of some other Churches. Greeks and other Eastern Orthodox sometimes refer to this church as the *ancient Church of Malabar*.

The Malankara Orthodox Church is a founding member of the World Council of Churches in 1948 and is in the family of Oriental Orthodox Churches with the Coptic, Syrian, Armenian, Ethiopian and Eritrean Churches. The Church, together with other Oriental Orthodox, is a dialogue partner with the Eastern Orthodox Churches of the Byzantine liturgical family since 1967, unofficially with the Roman Catholic Church under the aegis of the Pro Oriente Foundation since 1971 and officially with the Roman Catholic Church since 2002. There is also an official bilateral dialogue going on between the Malankara Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church in India since 1986. The Church is also participating in dialogues with the Anglican Church, the EKD or the federation of Protestant Churches in Germany and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

The first division in the one church of St Thomas in India occurred during the occupation of the church by the Portuguese. The Portuguese navigator Vasco dd Gama landed on the Keraia coast in 1498. The real division occurred after the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, precisely after the historic pledge of the *Coonen Cross* in 1653 when the Christian community rose

in protest against the Portuguese and the Roman Catholic colonial domination of the ancient Christians of St Thomas. The history up to this point is common to all presently different churches that were one and the same church in the pre-Portuguese period. But in narrating this story some of these churches take their later ecclesiastical connections and attribute them anachronistically to the earlier period of Indian Christianity. This is a serious methodological fallacy. The common knowledge handed on to the successive generations arises from the strong conviction that the Indian Christians of St. Thomas were an independent local church (*local in the technical ecclesiological sense in which it is used in early Christian ecclesiology. In this sense the Church of Rome, the Church of Alexandria, the Church of Antioch ad so on are all local independent churches but inter dependent in faith and sacramental communion*).

The Malankara Orthodox Church is deeply aware that the St. Thomas tradition has been kept unbroken in spite the of the vicissitudes of history and the various contacts, both friendly and unfriendly, with the ancient Church traditions outside India like Persian, Roman, Syrian and Anglican. We can legitimately say that the community always silently assumed in its self -understanding three elements :

(a) the church in India was founded by St. Thomas the Apostle and is apostolic like any other church in the world founded by the apostles Peter, Paul and other Apostles.

(b) The church in India is Eastern in its ethos and worship and is clearly distinguished from the Latin/Western tradition. This awareness of distinction dawned on them when they first met the Latin West through Portuguese colonial conquerors.

(c) The Church is fully self-governed by its own local heads and is rooted in the social and cultural soil of India. This awareness always remained latent in the mind of the Church, and there was no challenge to it from any quarters before the arrival of the Portuguese Roman Catholics. It became articulate and explicit beginning with the resistance at the forced Synod of Diamper called by the Portuguese Roman Catholic Archbishop Menezes in 1599. The resistance, however, had been suppressed by the iron hand of the colonial master for more than half a century, but it exploded in the 1653 uprising of the *Coonen Cross Oath*.

The oral tradition and folklore of the Church had always celebrated

the founding of seven churches in Kerala in the Malabar/Malankara region on the South West Coast of India, presently known as Kerala. Some of these historical sites like Niranam are still venerated as centers of the early church in India. In the same way the various Christian families in Kerala trace their family tree back to the four families in which St. Thomas was believed to have established priesthood through laying on of hands in order to continue the ministry of Christ in India. These so-called folk traditions are integral to the self-understanding and identity of the Malankara church. In fact the members of the ancient Christian community, irrespective of their present church affiliation, firmly share this deep conviction. This provides a common ground for the self-understanding of the presently separated churches, which emerged from the undivided tradition of 1653 years or so.

This shows, in ecumenical terms that the present division of St. Thomas Christians is a rather recent one and is fomented and sealed by the intervention of colonial and ecclesiastical interventions from Christian centers outside India as mentioned above.

Spiritually and liturgically the ancient Indian churches in the medieval period before the Portuguese era was with the Persian church. Apparently this was a cordial relationship that fully respected the autonomy/autocephaly of the Indian church and its particular cultural context. The Persian church in the Mesopotamian region became associated with the name of Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople who was condemned as a heretic at the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431. This incident in the 5<sup>th</sup> century happening within the Roman Empire did not affect the reputation of the Persian church flourishing in the Mesopotamian region and reaching out in an amazing missionary enterprise to several countries in Asia up to China. There is no evidence that the St. Thomas Christians in India were aware of the political and ecclesiastical implications of the issue of Nestorius and the Persian church's association with that name. For the Indians the connection was primarily liturgical and pastoral. The doctrinal and political ramifications of an event that happened in the far away Roman Empire in the 5<sup>th</sup> century were not probably known to them or irrelevant to their solid self understanding and heritage as the Christians of Thomas, the Apostle of Christ. Syriac language in its Eastern version was known to the Church only through the liturgical tradition. The Christian spiritual and ascetic tradition familiar to the clergy and the

people were smoothly in agreement with some of the best spiritual practices of ancient Indian religions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The community affairs were conducted under the leadership of the clergy. There is no evidence that any bishop coming from the Persian tradition ever interfered with the freedom and self-government of the Indian Church.

### Parting Ways

The Malankara Orthodox Church in its historical self-understanding claims and abides by the Oath of the Coonen Cross of 1653. This was the uprising of the Nazarani Christian community against the Portuguese/Roman Catholic colonial domination of their ancient, independent, Eastern Church in India. Essentially this was the first organized self-affirmation of the Indian Christian community against all forms of alien domination.

Although almost all of the Nazarani parishes then existing took part in the Coonen Cross, a large number of them were gradually lured away from their position of resistance back to the “old loyalty” or “Pazhaya Coor” (ie., 53 Years of complete subjugation to Portuguese and Roman Catholic rule) by the concerted efforts of Carmelite missionaries sent by Rome. People who stood by their really old loyalty, that is, the pre-Portuguese and pre-Roman Catholic tradition were called “Puthen Coor” (new loyalty) probably because they sought to restore their Eastern church connections. This is ironic, but can be understood in the colonial context. No wonder the imperial might of the Roman church and the colonial power of the Portuguese could easily interpret in their favour the history of a tiny Indian community in such a way that insiders could be made outsiders and real heirs could be called false claimants and vice versa. This is a major historiographical problem for the Malankara Church. The way they crushed the total opposition of an ancient, indigenous Christian community in India in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to imposed foreign rule and doctrine bears witness to the tremendously oppressive colonial power of the rising west vis-à-vis the rest of the world, and the sad plight of the native communities in Asia, Africa and the Americas. Western Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, was a happy collaborator and beneficiary in the rise and expansion of European empire all over the earth.

Soon after the event of Coonen Cross the Indian Nazarani community consecrated the head of their community Archdeacon Thomas as a



bishop with the title *MarThoma*. The very title of *MarThoma* they chose for their new spiritual and temporal head is ample evidence for the real conviction and feelings of the Indian Christian community. The Portuguese rulers and the Jesuit and Carmelite missionaries all had tried to wipe out the deep conviction of the Indian Christians about their apostolic rootedness in the Thomas tradition and their autonomy and indigenous character.

These foreigners, true children of the vigorous Counter Reformation and aggressive colonial and missionary movements, earnestly attempted to supplant the conviction of the Indian Christians with the medieval Roman Catholic concepts of papacy, universal church, papal jurisdiction over all Christians and so on. They highlighted the "Law of Peter" over against the "Way of Thoma". They had no knowledge of the indigenous forms of Eastern Christianity nor any respect for the "dark-skinned, barbarian" people outside of the west European region. The significance of the Coonen Cross and the later division of the one Indian Church to *Pazhaya Coor* and *Puthen Coor* has to be understood in the light of these circumstances.

### A New Turn

The line of the indigenous *Mar Thoma* bishops continued in the tradition of the *Puthen Coor* people, later known as the Jacobite/Orthodox Church. Faced with the imposing power and threat of the Portuguese/Roman church, the community leaders wrote to several Eastern Patriarchates like Alexandria and Antioch to bring them help against the western invaders. Thus in 1665 came Abdul Jaleel Gregorios, a bishop from Jerusalem belonging to the West Syrian Patriarchate of Antioch. He began to introduce the practices of the West Syrian Church in India, a process completed over the next two centuries by successive bishops from the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Middle East visiting Malankara.

The title *Mar Thoma* was changed to Mar Dionysius by another Syrian bishop Mar Gregorios who re-consecrated Mar Thoma VI in 1770. Once again we see the efforts of foreign prelates to mask or eradicate the tradition of St. Thomas symbolised by the title *MarThoma*. They invariably saw it as a threat to their authority and dominion. We will see this colonial interest to keep the Indian church under subjugation re-emerging in various forms in the relationship of the Malankara Church with the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch until today.

Although the title *Mar Thoma* was out of use for over a century and the title *Malankara Metropolitan* became prominent, especially for legal purposes, the former title was resumed by the Catholicate of the East in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Mission of Help**

The arrival of the Anglican Missionaries at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and their proposal of the “Mission of Help” apparently to re-invigorate the ancient Malankara Church had far reaching consequences for the unity of the Church. Under the spell of the British colonial rule, Kerala witnessed an all round renaissance in education and social order. The founding of the *Kottayam College*, presently known as Old Seminary or Orthodox Theological Seminary at Kottayam by Pulikottil Joseph Mar Dionysius II in 1815 with the help of the British Resident Col. Munro and the Travancore Royal family was a major landmark in the cultural history of Kerala.

The collaboration between the British missionaries and the Malankara Church came to an end in 1836 with the *Mavelikkara Synod* where the Malankara Church rejected *in toto* the proposals of Bishop Wilson of Calcutta for ‘reforming’ the Church. However, the Protestant teachings of the Missionaries of the Church Missionary Society so influenced Abraham Malpan, a teacher of theology at Old Seminary that he began to edit the Eucharistic liturgy according to the theological principles of Protestant Reformation in Europe. This led to a crisis. After many years of bitter controversy and litigation, the Mar Thoma Church was formed in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century thus dividing the Malankara Church once again.

### **The Syrian Connection**

In the fight with the Portuguese and the British, with the Roman Catholic and Anglican Protestant missionary enterprises, the Malankara Church sought the help of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch in order to maintain its eastern and apostolic character. Some of the bishops who arrived from the Middle East were very committed to the cause of Malankara Church. The Church is very grateful to them for their sincere spiritual efforts to pastorally help the Indian Church. Unfortunately not all of them had the same pastoral intention. Some of the Syrian prelates began to exploit the muddled situation in the Indian Church and catered to their desire for lording over the Indian Church. The 19<sup>th</sup> century also

witnessed the beginning of a chain of unfortunate litigation within the Malankara Church. Though details vary in each instance of the court case, there were common questions in the mind of the community like the following:

- Has the Patriarch of Antioch any authority of jurisdiction over the Malankara Church?
- Who has the power of temporal authority over the parish churches and their property- the Malankara Metropolitan or the foreign bishops delegated by the Patriarch?
- What is the basis of the identity of the autonomy and identity of the Malankara Church? In what ways can it be fully expressed and realized?

The answers received from various quarters, both directly and indirectly, can be generally indicated as follows:

- Firstly, in the circumstances of the Malankara Church in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries no one raised the issue of the authority of the Patriarch of Antioch, because the Church was in a life and death struggle, first with the Portuguese/Roman Catholic invaders, and then with the British/Protestant colonial reformers. The Syrian Church of Antioch was invited to help the Indian Church. It was clear in the minds of those Indian leaders who invited the foreign prelates that they were guests of the Malankara Church. According to the best of Indian hospitality tradition guest-host relationship is only politely assumed and not explicitly stated. Every time a foreign bishop conducted himself against this understanding there was simmering resistance in the minds of the leaders of the Malankara Church. It was in 1876 that the Patriarch Peter III himself decided to visit the Indian Church in the context of the fight between the Malankara Church and the Reform party. The Patriarch felt that his authority would be undermined if he did not act. The Synod that the Patriarch convened at Mulanthuruthy in 1876 was a crucial landmark in the organizational history of the Malankara Church. While acknowledging the positive organizational aspects, one should note that the Patriarch could affirm his direct jurisdiction over the Indian Church, which he considered as some sort of an Archdiocese subdivided into seven dioceses. Later Patriarchs generally followed this line, and continued to affirm their direct jurisdictional power over the Indian Church

The Malankara Church now woke up to the fatal consequences of this Patriarchal claim. The Church had barely escaped the colonial clutches of Rome and Canterbury. Now they found themselves in a new situation of subjugation to the Syrian prelates who were originally considered as brothers in faith, helpers and collaborators coming from a sister Church. The waking up process slowly expressed itself in the deep desire for an Indian Catholicos as the head of the Indian Church and symbol of the apostolic autonomy and indigenous identity of the Malankara Church.

Secondly, though the Malankara Church conceded a brotherly spiritual and pastoral care of its faithful by the foreign bishops (they were invited to do so), there was absolutely no doubt in the mind of its leaders about the autonomy of the Malankara Church. The Malankara Metropolitans understood themselves as heads and rulers of the Church in the succession line of Archdeacons and *MarThoma* Bishops. Gradually, however, the Syrian bishops and Patriarchs understood themselves, as in any colonial situation, as the rulers of the Malankara Church. They expected the Malankara Metropolitans, or later Catholicoses, to behave as their subordinates. While the Indian Metropolitans and Catholicoses asserted their community's self-understanding of the succession of the Apostle Thomas and explicitly affirmed the freedom and identity of the Indian Church, the Patriarchs began to undermine the very tradition of St. Thomas and used spiritual weapons like ex-communication of the Indian leaders. For example, the infamous bull No. 203 (June 1970) of Patriarch Yakoob III stating that St. Thomas was not a high priest, and not even a priest, because he was absent when Jesus commissioned the apostles and so on was targeted at the apostolic claims of the Indian Church ("...for he was not a priest as it is evident from the gospel of St John 20:21-24. As he was not a priest how did he become high priest?").

Unfortunately, like the Portuguese and the British, the Syrians also succeeded in further dividing the Malankara Church, because one section of the Church, though a minority, supported the inordinate claims of Patriarchal authority over the Indian Church and agreed to the Patriarchal act of totally trivializing the venerable Indian heritage of St. Thomas and humiliating the great leaders of the Indian Church through such illegitimate acts like threat of excommunication.



It should be remembered that when the Syrian Antiochian Church came into contact with the Malankara Church from 1665 and onwards the Syrian Church was a small, poor, scattered and illiterate community in the Middle East under the oppressive Muslim rule of the Ottoman Turks. It was always a point of pride for them that they could rule over a church in India with a far larger number of faithful than their own and over a community that was socially superior, economically strong and politically free. People in India received these bishops with generous hospitality and devotion simply because of their spiritual garb and the fair-skinned 'colonial' outfit. A similar situation prevailed in the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church with respect to the white Latin\European bishops who ruled over them until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The well-known fulminations of a prominent 17<sup>th</sup> century Syro-Malabar clergyman like Paremakal Thoma Kathanar against the arrogance of such white skinned European clergy and the manner in which they treated the black-skinned Indians are worth remembering here.

### **The Catholicate, Symbol of Freedom and Autocephaly**

The event of momentous importance in the history of the Malankara Church after the Coonen Cross Oath of 1653 was the instituting of the Catholicate in 1912. This was not a sudden happening, but the climax of a long process of awakening in the Indian Church ever since the Portuguese occupation of the Church. All the aspirations of the community to express its identity and apostolic freedom culminated in the Catholicate. The question whether it is a "re-establishment" of the Persian Catholicate of ancient days or "establishment" of an independent Catholicate as the symbol of the identity of the ancient Church of St. Thomas in India is irrelevant to a large extent. We cannot ignore the historical aspects of such an institution nor can we underestimate its actual missionary and canonical potential in India. A Christian Church like the Malankara Church with a profound awareness of its apostolic roots, freedom, and long heritage in India has all the authority to institute its own head and organize its own hierarchy like any other ancient apostolic church in the world.

In the 1930s Mar Ivanios, head of a monastery and one of the bishops of the Malankara Orthodox Church joined the Roman Catholic Church with some of his clergy and faithful and set up what is known as Malankara (Rite) Catholic Church. This was a typical case of Uniatism

practised by the Roman Church amidst all Eastern Churches since the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### Search for Unity

In 1934 the Malankara Association, the representative body of the people and the clergy of the Church adopted a constitution for the Malankara Church. The then separate positions of the Malankara Metropolitan and the Catholicos held by two different incumbents were integrated in one incumbent of the apostolic seat of St. Thomas as both the temporal and spiritual head of the Malankara Church. The Constitution however generously and with a view to future unity of the two factions, provided space for a Patriarch recognized by the Malankara Church, as spiritual head without any power of ordination or jurisdiction, appointment or disposal in the Malankara Church.

Already at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Malankara Church was divided into two factions: one side supporting the Patriarchal claims of jurisdiction over Malankara and other side holding the ideal of the indigenous, autonomous Malankara Orthodox Church ruled by its own Indian heads. Since the prominent leader of the Indian side then was Malankara Metropolitan Geevarghese Mar Dionysius (Vattasseril), it was called by the other party as Metran's faction. The Patriarch wreaked vengeance on Mar Dionysius, an outstanding theologian, administrator and saintly figure, by "excommunicating" him uncanonically. The Malankara Church and the civil courts in India rejected the excommunication as an illegal, individual and uncanonical act of a foreign prelate who wanted to suppress the genuine canonical aspiration of the apostolic church of India to manage its own affairs without alien intervention.

The long litigation between these factions ended in 1958 by the verdict of the Supreme Court recognising the authority of the Catholicos cum Malankara Metropolitan over the Malankara Church. The Patriarch's party that contested his authority was ordered by the Supreme Court to pay up all the court expenses incurred by the Catholicos side. Immediately after the Supreme Court verdict, the then Patriarch Yakoob III of Antioch and the Catholicos Basilius Gevaerghese II agreed to a historic peace settlement by accepting and acknowledging each other. The Catholicos exchanged the Reconciliation document with the Patriarchal delegate Metropolitan Mar Julius at the Old Seminary,

Kottayam in December 1958. All peace-loving people of Malankara and members of the sister churches rejoiced at this precious gift of peace. The Malankara church became one, spiritually and administratively.

Unfortunately this blessing remained only for about 12 years. The Catholicos had exchanged the peace document, with the formula 'accepting the Patriarch of Antioch subject to the constitution'. However, the constitution and the title of the Catholicos and his apostolic authority were questioned in a new series of litigation. This led to another historic verdict of the Supreme Court in 1995 re-affirming the validity and authority of the position of the Catholicos cum Malankara Metropolitan. The court instructed the Catholicos to convene a Malankara Association meeting of all the parishes of the Malankara Church in order to begin a new era of peace and unity. Although the Association was validly and canonically held in the presence of a Supreme Court observer in 2001 at Parumala, unity was not achieved, not because of the lack of desire for peace on the side of the common people and parishes, but because of the great manipulative skill of a church leader who had ambitions to fulfil in a divided church. Four bishops on the former Patriarchal side declared allegiance to the Constitution of 1934 and to the Catholicos and took the position of unity along with their priests and faithful. The Catholicos publicly declared that doors were still open for peace and unity and exhorted all leaders to respect the people's desire for unity.

It is important to note that both factions held on to their common ground of the same liturgy and same faith in spite of long years of litigation. It is really one Church. The litigation and division were essentially on account of the dispute on authority and jurisdiction, particularly in temporal matters and not on matters of faith. The Supreme Court has upheld more than once the constitution of 1934 as providing solutions for these disputes and as an effective instrument for unity. But far above such legal aspects, most of the true believers are conscious that the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church is really one body in Christ, in one faith and one worship. Many are fervently "hoping against hope" that the Church would be united once again for the glory of God. (The present writer, for instance, who enjoyed the bliss of unity in the 1960s has never accepted that there are two different Churches with the names Jacobite and Orthodox, but keeps its oneness in his heart in all humility and hope in God's healing power.)

## Conclusion

Retelling the sad story of division among the Nazarani Christians of Kerala has to be necessarily an exercise of hope for unity as well. Looking at the history and identity of Malankara Orthodox Church from an ecumenical perspective, I am led to raise some broad, elementary questions that I hope will remain with us in order to help us in some soul-searching and to take us out of the present state of separate existence.

1. If the Nazarani Christian community of St.Thomas could remain as one single Church and family until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, who divided us and for what cause?
2. To what extent are we justified in fighting each other in the name of Rome or Antioch, Bagdad or Canterbury? Can we the Christians of St.Thomas with as much antiquity, apostolicity and autonomy as these ancient churches organize our affairs on our own without any subservient reference to them or accepting any alien superior authority except that of loving communion? Can we agree on an essential basis of common Christian faith and practice of the undivided Church, choose our own head for the united Church, and evolve our own Indian system of hierarchy and administration while maintaining very cordial and Christian communion with other churches.
3. What are the racial and economic factors involved in our people's and leaders' easy submission to foreign ecclesiastical authority during the colonial period as well as in the contemporary post-colonial era?
4. How can we reinstate our own ecclesiological-historiographical methods unlike those used by the dominant Churches and colonial masters in India for their own interests so that we as a united Church can do effective Christian witness in our pluralistic and secular contexts?



# Identity and Challenges: Experience of the Church of South India

George Oommen\*

What constitutes the identity of the Church of South India (CSI) and its difference, if any, from other Churches depend on the way one constructs this identity. My effort in this paper is to read how the CSI understands itself, as well as the challenges that confront the CSI from a viewpoint in between its colonial and postcolonial past. I have tried to incorporate a perspective, which shows the identity and challenges of the CSI in terms of recent views and prejudices. The priority will not be to tell the story sequentially, but to highlight some of the issues, which are perceived as prominent in the life and experience of the CSI.

## Historical Antecedents and Principles

By the turn of the twentieth century, an ecumenical spirit had already commenced in India, as it had in other parts of Asia, at various levels. There were instances of Church union initiatives in China and in Japan.<sup>1</sup> This was part of an Asian search for its own autonomy and national experience in Christianization of their respective countries. However, it should be said at the outset that what has been finally experienced in India in terms of an organic union of Churches was historically path breaking and unprecedented. For the first time in the history of

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1 Rajaiah D. Paul, *The First Decade; An Account of the Church of South India*, CLS, Madras, 1958, p.18.

Christianity, the deep division between the Episcopal Churches and Non-Episcopal Churches created during the Reformation was healed by the their union in India.

The initial movements in unity, which later led to the organic union, were preceded by local unions of various mission groups belonging to the same traditions in India. Thus, in 1901 Presbyterians in South India came together, bringing people of Reformed traditions together. A federal union of all the Congregationalists, who had inherited a Calvinist heritage in their theology and ecclesiology, was formed in 1905. However, the most successful and historic interdenominational integration came about when Churches of both Presbyterian and Congregationalist background in South India and Jaffna, Sri Lanka united to emerge as one, namely, South India United Church (SIUC) in 1908. In 1919 the Basel mission of the then Malabar region also united with SIUC. But the most defining moment in the story of the CSI's origins was when a group of Indian Christian leaders of various Church traditions, including Anglicans, came together in Tranquebar in 1919, resulting in the famous Tranquebar Manifesto. This became a path breaking appeal for union but also functioned as the basis on which further union negotiations would take shape in South India. For the next twenty-eight years negotiations followed, especially dealing with contentious theological and ministerial issues which had divided the Episcopalians who believed in the Apostolic Succession theory or Historic Episcopacy and Non-Episcopalians. It is important to remember that the Calvinistic and Reformed Traditions had had a long standing theological feud with Church of England, and that Methodists (who joined union negotiations after 1919), who were the inheritors of the Evangelical Revival of eighteenth century, had also rebelled against the Church of England establishment.

Taking the strengths of the three traditions into consideration, the Tranquebar Manifesto declared: 'In this Church we believe that three Scriptural elements must be conserved: 1) The *Congregational* element, representing the "the whole Church", with "every member" having immediate access to God, each exercising his gift for the development of the whole body. 2) We believe it should include the delegated, organized or *Presbyterian* element, whereby the Church could unite in a General Assembly, Synods or Councils in organized unity. 3) We believe

it should include the representative, executive or *Episcopal* element. Thus all three elements, no one of which is absolute or sufficient without the other, should be included in the Church of the future, for we aim not at compromise for the sake of peace, but at comprehension for the sake of truth'.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the common ground of the historic episcopate and the spiritual equality of all members were at the very centre of the Manifesto. The four aspects which formed the basis of the union according to the Tranquebar Manifesto also indicated what was to come in future: 1) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as containing all things necessary to salvation; 2) The Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed; 3) The two sacraments ordained by Christ Himself – Baptism and the Lord's Supper; 4) The Historic Episcopate, locally adopted. As can be noted, the basis of the proposed union was very straight forward and drew itself out of the early Church, thus implying that the new emerging union was an authentic Church within the Universal Church tradition, and a new creation in Christ as well. This was a 'new coming into being' where it was accepted that 'union cannot be brought about either by the rigid imposition of the ancient creeds and confessions or by drawing up a detailed new statement of belief'.<sup>3</sup>

The negotiations were not an easy process as historical and theological antecedents that divided various traditions came into play during this time. Churches in the West, who were not only the source of missionaries and economies of their respective mission societies, but also the generators of theology of their traditions, were directly involved in the interactions and deliberations. There were breaking points and stalemates. The most contentious issue was Episcopacy itself. Many other conflicting issues arose, mainly in relation to the teachings related to Apostolic Succession theory, which included the unification of ministry. As we will see later, it was due to the sheer determination of various Indian visionaries and some radical missionaries and their theological profundity that saw the negotiations through to meaningful fruition. V.S. Azariah,

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2 Bengt Sundkler, *Church of South India: The Movement Towards Union, 1900 – 1947*, Lutterworth Press, London, 1954, p.101f.

3 Michael Hollis, *The Significance of South India*, Lutterworth Press, London, 1966, p. 22.

the first Indian Anglican bishop, V. Santiago, a Congregationalist theologian and Meshach Peter of the Arcot Mission, the main architects of the Tranquebar Manifesto, were at the forefront of negotiations.<sup>4</sup> The most difficult stand-offs were due to the opposition from the Church of England, who at times was more ready to count the cost of the union for the Anglican Tradition, than to envision the vast ecumenical possibilities for a United Church in India.<sup>5</sup>

No one involved in the negotiations had any clarity with regard to the concrete shape that the United Church would take finally.<sup>6</sup> All were open to the possibility of God acting in and through the new Church. In this experience, the history of the negotiations that took place in the birth of the CSI challenges Churches all around the world to guard against extreme dogmatism that can kill the very essence of the Church and its mission. No one was trying to return to the original truth and the exaggerated fundamentals of their traditions, but instead, they were all searching as to how best they could look towards the future in the given Indian context. Thus, four major Post-Reformation traditions, the Anglican, Presbyterian, Congregationalist and Methodist, integrated together in one organic union in September, 1947, the year that India achieved its freedom from the colonial domination.

The CSI came into being with the affirmation that it was the will of God that had brought them together, fulfilling the prayer and mission of Jesus 'that they may all be one and that the world may believe that Thou didst send me'.<sup>7</sup> It was seen as the local expression of the great catholic unity of the Body of Christ.

### **An Indian Legacy**

It was not a historical accident or mere coincidence that after almost

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4 See M.K. Kuriakose, *History of Christianity in India: Source Materials*, CLS, Madras, 1982, pp. 317 – 19, for the Manifesto and the 31 names of Indians and 2 missionaries.

5 Ninan Koshy, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia*, Vol. I, World Student Christian Federation, Hong Kong, 2004, p.91.

6 Hollis, *The Significance of South India*, 1966, p. 20.

7 See the *Constitution*, and the *Basis of Union*, Kuriakose, *History of Christianity in India*, 1982, pp. 378 – 85.



half a century of experiences of togetherness, struggle and challenges, the CSI was inaugurated in 1947 when India celebrated its independence, after a long challenge to colonialism. Many nationalistic aspirations were implied in Indian leadership's search towards a united Church, and that is why the CSI's formative processes almost paralleled with the movement towards nationhood. Indian leaders could forthrightly tell the Western Churches and missionaries that Indian Christianity need not carry a burden of interdenominational rivalry and conflict, which were almost as a result of the Western religio-cultural context. So underlying the initiative for a Church union movement in India was a psychology of resentment towards missionary domination and Western dominated ecclesiology. One missionary's statement captured the mind of many. He felt that if Western missionaries do not support the initiatives for union in India, 'the Indians themselves would pursue the matter and would, I believe, settle it one way or another'.<sup>8</sup>

While Indian Christians shared in the universal experience and meaning of Christianity, there was always a search for relating the incarnated Christ to the Indian context. That is why it was stated in the CSI Constitution that the purpose of the union was also 'conserving all that is of spiritual value in its Indian heritage'.<sup>9</sup> Thus, a profound search for an Indian identity was very evident in the processes that led to the union. What did it mean to witness to the incarnated Christ in the Indian sub continent? This question was at the background of various conversations and statements found in the history of the formation. Part of the realization was that unless Christianity relates to and identifies itself with the Indian experiences and Indian challenges, it would not be an effective vehicle of God's mission. A dispassionate evaluation of the CSI's post-colonial legacy, however, would reveal that it has not lived up to its own self-understanding as an Indian Church. Predominantly it has carried its Western legacy more than an Indian identity in the post-independent India. We will not consider the numerous reasons now.

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8 Quoted in K. M. George, *Church of South India; Negotiations Towards Union, 1919 – 1947*, Punnaveli, 1997, p. 64.

9 Kuriakose, *History of Christianity in India*, 1982, p. 380., See also p. 320.

## Vision of a dissolving Identity

The constitution of the CSI emphasized that it should become an Indian Church in terms of its financial and personnel capabilities, especially in the matter of evangelization. However, at a deeper level, what we see is an urge on the part of the leaders to break a new path, one away from the Western heritage, with a sense of autonomy and to shape a self assured new identity in India. It was an effort to help the Church to 'express under Indian conditions and Indian forms, the spirit, the thought and the life of the Church Universal'.<sup>10</sup> A nationalism of sorts was present in the very heart of this movement.

The unity that the Christian leaders had envisaged was perceived in line with such a nationalistic theological vision; an organic unity of various traditions in India, a product of Western Christian experience, is God's will so that it become an effective instrument of God in the given situation. Effective evangelization of India was another major stated aim of the union. Of course it is a different question altogether whether this evangelization has been achieved in terms of disaffiliating large number of people to the new Church, as a result of the union.<sup>11</sup> In fact evangelization seems to have been largely ignored as a priority in the initial stages of the CSI's life and it became very much preoccupied with the maintenance of its ministry as it went along.

It should be stated that CSI from the very inception did not think about a long lasting identity or a static role for itself. In fact there was ample evidence of a radical theological envisioning in terms of its transient nature and ever changing role. This implied that the Church was only a means for the larger mission of God in the world. R. D. Paul, one of the early interpreters of the self-understanding of the CSI, very significantly makes the point that 'the Church of South India does not imagine itself to be a Church which has been brought into existence in order that it may be one more Church among the various Churches in the world. The C.S.I, on the other hand, conceives of itself as being the means of

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10 Paul, *The First Decade*, 1958, p. 8.

11 M. Abel, *The Church of South India After Thirty Years*, CLS, Madras, 1978, p.18.

bringing together other Churches, and that when the moment comes when other Churches would also unite, *it will dissolve itself in its present form, lose its present identity* and will agree to take its place in a bigger and larger united Church which would carry out God's will in the world. ... *It is willing to give up its identity and its constitution, if by so doing it can bring into being something even more in accordance with Christ's will for His Churches in the world*'.<sup>12</sup> This is the theology of CSI regarding the identity of any Church, and in that sense, it acknowledges a profound ecclesio-missiological truth that the Church is only a means for the mission of God and not an end in itself.

The CSI Liturgy is perceived as one of the most holistic and comprehensive liturgies in the world; one where various traditions blended together in perfect harmony and rhythm. In fact, looking back one might observe that it has been one of the most significant sources of unity in the CSI. However, it was not achieved without difficulties. Various local congregations resisted the use of the new liturgy in the initial period. When it comes to certain liturgical symbols and some practices, even now an 'ex' psyche appears in the minds of the CSI members. Consequently feelings of ex-Anglicanism, ex-Presbyterianism and so on, are not uncommon. For instance, one should not be surprised if a nineteenth century Methodist Hymn book is found on the pews of an ex-Methodist congregation. But there was no attempt to impose uniformity of worship initially and congregational freedom was upheld. It was affirmed that the 'ordering and development of the worship of a united Church be left to grow out of its life in unity'.<sup>13</sup> Here a criticism is not out of place: the CSI has not allowed adequate space for experimentation and autonomy in the area of formulating new official liturgies. This cost the Church dearly in terms of its demography. The movement of CSI members to non-mainline forms of Christianity are also related to people seeking after meaningful worship patterns.

Further, there are emphatic indications on the *Basis of Union* of the CSI affirming freedom and honesty in expressions of belief without

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12 Paul, *The first Decade*, 1958, p.9., Italics mine.

13 Hollis, *The Significance of South India*, 1966, p. 22.

allowing too much individual subjectivity to play a role. It seems to acknowledge that contemporary situations would warrant dynamism of expression and interpretation in our Christian faith.<sup>14</sup> An insertion on the *Basis* stated in a note that, 'the uniting Churches accept the fundamental truths embodied in the Creeds named above (sc. Apostles' and Nicene) as providing a sufficient basis of union; but do not intend thereby to demand the assent of individuals to every word or phrase in them, or to exclude reasonable liberty of interpretation, or to assert that those Creeds are a complete expression of the Christian faith.'<sup>15</sup> Social and cultural setting should play in shaping the ecclesiology of the Indian Church without disregard or disrespect to its profound past. This faith journey embedded in the experience of the pre-union period, which may be characterized as an ecclesiological pilgrimage into the future without giving finality or absoluteness to theological categories, is vital for any Church which takes its context seriously.

The question of whether the CSI has fulfilled the task of sustaining the values of freedom of expression can be debated. On the one hand, some might observe that it did not further such freedom. On the other hand, a subculture of openness has survived in the CSI, by keeping its strength of non-dogmatism. This open spirit is not weakness but a new culture of strength. Unlike many other Churches, CSI does not get suppressed under the weight of its own tradition. It is open to other people and especially ordained presbyters coming from various traditions, including Roman Catholic, in sharing the altar and participating in liturgies without an air of reservation and an excessive sense of confessionalism. In fact, after thirty years of its experience, the Abel Committee reported that at the local level, Roman Catholic people have been known to participate in Holy Communion, which is officially forbidden by the dogmas and rules of the both the Roman Catholic Church and the CSI. This included Roman Catholics participating in the CSI Eucharist and vice versa.<sup>16</sup> Further, it is common that CSI allows blessing of marriages in which one partner may come from a non-Christian tradition. This

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14 Hollis, *The Significance of South India*, 1966, p. 38.

15 As quoted in Hollis, *The Significance of South India*, 1966, p. 38.

16 Abel, *The Church of South India*, 1978, p. 2.



clearly demonstrates that CSI has kept its tradition and identity which is non-dogmatic and not unusually confessionalistic.

### **The Danger of Bureaucratization**

A vision of a Church which would be ready to dissolve itself, if necessary, and lose its own identity was the inner strength of CSI's early formation. But where does it stand now? I do not hesitate to observe that CSI, instead of becoming a Church that loses its identity, seems to be evolving as a super denomination with unwieldy ecclesiastical structures, hierarchy and institutionalization. Unfortunately, its effectiveness as an agent of evoking change has been diminished rather than enhanced by these processes. The CSI is getting depressed as a community by the resultant frustrations of its own weight. It is in the light of such an assessment that I would like to look at the identity and challenges of the CSI.

However, it should be observed at the same time that the most positive self-understanding from which CSI forms the prominent identity is its ecumenical identity itself, by which it strikes a historic balance to some of the negative weight it carries. So, while one should be critical of the processes, which resulted in a mega denomination, in no way can historians of Christianity ignore its effort to live up to its original calling and subsequent identity as an ecumenical pioneer. We only need to look at the efforts of the union discussions that it entered into with the Baptists and the Lutheran Churches in India. Although these did not end in union, theological discussion in relation to the talks seems to have further enriched the self-understanding of these Churches and an atmosphere of mutuality still prevails in their interactions.

The CSI has continued to challenge other Churches in India to confront the task of ecumenical dialogue. Baptists and Lutheran traditions have been engaged in dialogue with CSI, with a possibility for merger and enlarging the union so that one day it would be a Church of India. In the 1940s, an Inter-Church Group was set up to lead these negotiations and theological conversations. The Baptists left the negotiations early, by recognizing the fact they were not ready for an organic union, which was always the vision of the CSI. The CSI-Lutheran Joint Theological Commission, which was established in 1950 continued its work in the 1950s. Although this was one of the most systematically held discussions

between two Churches in India, in 1956 the negotiations were called off as no agreement could be found on the question of the Church's unity and continuity.

However the CSI was to live up to its own identity as the most open and ecumenical Churches in India as it initiated a union process with the Church of North India and the Mar Thoma Syrian Church in the 1970s, thus opening a new avenue in Indian ecumenical journey. The Joint Council of the three Churches worked towards achieving an organic oneness under one umbrella, namely, Bharat Church. Although eventually, the issue of adopting a common name and organization was abandoned, a new model of Christian unity has come into being within this communion of Churches by mutual recognition and full acceptance of each other's faith, ministry and sacraments. This may be described as a unique pattern of modern conciliar unity. This only demonstrates the CSI's continuing inventiveness in the area of ecumenical thinking and leadership.

### **Historic Episcopate**

Historic Episcopate was the most contentious issue, which continued in the negotiations that followed the famous Tranquebar Manifesto. However it was made clear during the ongoing discussions, that the CSI would not adhere to any particular interpretation of the Historic Episcopate and that it would be accepted in the new Church in the constitutional form. The Church did not give any particular interpretation to the concept of historic episcopacy and the Constitution simply declared that as the office has been 'accepted from early times it may in this sense be called 'historic'. Thus, it was widely acknowledged at that time that the CSI was paving the way for a new tradition for the office of Episcopacy without accepting any particular theory and that they were simply falling in line with the New Testament tradition in this regard. Consistent with such a theological position, the CSI highlighted the teaching, liturgical and pastoral responsibilities of a bishop rather than the authoritarian ministerial power it might carry.

The Historic Episcopate, which the CSI adopted with the hope that it would function as one of the most unifying symbols, also integrated various other ministries of the Church as the chief shepherd under Christ.

When it comes to the Episcopal office, it should be emphasized that the original vision of the office was that, within CSI, the office will emerge as something new and not necessarily carry forward historic antecedents with it. This was in perfect harmony with the overall directional change it had taken, namely to allow the Church to take its shape as the Holy Spirit leads. It was not *ad hocism*, but a theological foundation, which the united Church took as its basis as a Church in constant pilgrimage to and union with God. In 1954, one of the early bishops and the first Indian moderator, Sumithra, captured this spirit and value system as follows, 'The bishops in the Church of South India are not all of the episcopal tradition. Before their consecration, some were Congregational ministers, some Presbyterians and some Methodist. So they do not and cannot follow any one of the current episcopal traditions. All episcopal traditions are to them unfamiliar and strange. In reality they are learning for themselves what it means to be a bishop in the Church of Christ.'<sup>17</sup> R. D. Paul has, in the early history of the CSI, noted that there is very little status and authority, which the constitution speaks of in relation to episcopacy. But the teaching and the liturgical ministries of the office are amply emphasized in the constitution. However, what has been evolving over the last fifty years is an episcopal office about which members of the CSI are unhappy and incisively critical. In fact, in the 1960s itself, the theological commission of the Church warned that the 'temporal power and the worldly honour' associated with the office will only discredit the Episcopacy.<sup>18</sup>

This state of affairs is not difficult to explain. The episcopacy seems to have taken on itself responsibilities other than what has been envisaged in its Constitution. The most blatant example of this has been demonstrated in the recent alleged incident of the CSI's Moderator (some bishops) being present and even presiding over the consecration of a person as a bishop of a sectarian group with whom the CSI has no communion. It only shows the fundamental theological ignorance and the politics of authority attached to the office. If only the bishops involved

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17 Paul, *The First Decade*, 1958, p. 157.

18 R. D. Paul, *Ecumenism in Action; A historical Survey of the Church of South India*, CLS, Madras, 1972, p. 195.

had got this great pilgrim Church to journey with them in considering the ecclesiological and theological basis and possibilities for such a move, it would have opened up great new avenues for a Church, which has always been open to contextual needs. Instead, such authoritarianism and unilateral actions have only created further conflicts. In fact it was an opportune moment in the history of the Churches in India to build bridges with such non-mainline Christian moments in India to which there is a movement of CSI members. There could have been serious theological debate about such a move in the longstanding traditions of democratic procedures in the CSI in questions of relationship with other Churches.

In the final analysis one has to agree that the Episcopal office of the CSI seems to have been overcome by the negative authoritarian and power centred model from the Anglican tradition. The dimensions of being a chief shepherd and a chief pastor to the people of God are being largely ignored or forgotten in the heavy load of administrative work that is entrusted to bishops. K. M. George, a lay commentator on the CSI history, has gone to the extent of observing that, 'as years rolled on, it seemed that an unseemly scramble began to creep in this plush job instead of a higher calling with all the possible position of popularity, self-promotion and self-aggrandizement. A number of recent incumbents (who were considered as well-regarded pastors) seemed to have lost the sense of vision, integrity, fair play and justice, let alone commitment to the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'.<sup>19</sup> Most of the official evaluations on the life and experience of the CSI have pointed to the emerging trend of concentrating unjustified power into the hands of bishops. Way back in 1977, the Abel committee had clearly pointed to this by saying, 'This phenomenon has tended to encourage centralization of authority and bureaucratic procedures even against the constitutional intent and purpose. Consequently, there is too much decision-making power at the top, too much apathy at the grass-roots and too much jockeying for positions in the middle. Further, too much concentration of power, patronage and prestige in the hands of bishops has been responsible in

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19 K. M. George, *Church of South India: Life in Union (1947–1997)*, ISPCK/CSS, 1999, p. 249.



some cases for the unseemly, undignified and un-Christian race for bishopric.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless no concrete actions for directional change appear to have been taken so far. It should, however, be stated that the lay and the ordained are almost equally responsible for this state of affairs, as they are the one who ultimately confer the powers that may be attached to an office. One of the main challenges of the CSI in the near future will be to critically and objectively look at how the Episcopal office has been involved and to consider whether the emerging style has hindered or furthered the ministerial and the missionary task of the Church as a whole. If it has not, CSI should consider other patterns of office, which will still hold the church with a sense of unity, and at the same time give profound theological and liturgical directions.

### Mission and Evangelism

It should be emphatically noted that the fundamental goal of the initiative for the union of Churches in India came to the fore as a means of effective evangelization and witness to the love of God in and through Christ in a nation of plurality of religions and affiliations. That mission continues to be at the very core of any Church including the CSI. The mission of the Church in India is in a particular setting, and it calls for a particular approach. However, Christians, including CSI members, seem to have developed an ethnic, rather than a Christian identity, which is contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ. The CSI has a chequered history in participating in the political life of the nation for the sake of all people and particularly for whom justice is denied. The fact that CSI leaders were among the most prominent groups who declared their uncritical allegiance and submission to the powers that may be during the Internal Emergency regime (1975-77) in India points to the danger of the weakness of it succumbing to ethnic and minority priorities over the prophetic ministry for which it is placed in this world.<sup>21</sup> The emerging power of religious fundamentalism and the denial of freedom to believe and to convert is a blatant challenge to the very secular fabric of Indian

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20 Abel, *The Church of South India*, 1978, p.49.

21 George Oommen, 'Minority Consciousness of Christians in Post-Independent India: A Historical Perspective', *Indian Church History Review*, Vol.XIX, No.1, 1985.

society. It was indeed commendable that the CSI Bishop of Madras, Dr. Devasahayam and several other members were at the forefront of the recent struggle against the Tamil Nadu Freedom of Religion bill, which denied the very basic human rights of people to convert. This had particular implications for the history of Dalit freedom movements in India as rightly acknowledged by Bishop Devasahayam.

This takes us to the question of the character of the Christian Community that we seek to project ourselves as. K. C. Abraham in a timely article during the fiftieth anniversary of the CSI, poses these missional and ministerial challenges by calling CSI to be a community of empowerment and prophetic counter culture. 'In this situation', he states, 'the nature of the communities we seek has become an urgent concern. The Church should be at the service of people in their search for meaningful communities which are empowered to live in harmonious relationships with nature and between different faiths... But our strategy should be to build smaller local communities which could be counter signs to existing society. It is likely that such counter communities could evolve out of our rural congregations where church life is not so distorted by the power wielders as in our urban congregations... A genuine community should always be open to others in love. But the rootedness of the community in the faith of Jesus gives it a special character. Our attention should be on the identity and mission of the Church as a community or communities'.<sup>22</sup>

The mounting results of globalization and the consumerist culture and the plurality of rich religions in our context particularly should shape our understanding of mission. In fact, the CSI, which emerged as counter cultural model to the Western denominational and colonial paradigms of mission, needs to take leadership now in evolving relevant and meaningful missional patterns in a world of growing self-awareness, identity and a sense of self-sufficiency in every religion particularly in India, where various religions have longstanding and long-lasting experiences.

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22 K. C. Abraham, 'The Church of South India in the Twenty First Century: Ministry and Mission', J. W. Gladstone, (ed.), *United to Unite; History of the Church of South India, 1947 – 1997*, Chennai, 1997, p. 154.

The growing dichotomy between the life of the local congregation and the mission of the larger institutional Church of which they are an integral part, at the same time, creates a sense of alienation many a time. Regardless of intent and practice, for many within the Church the aim of several huge institutions is merely to create a space for power and authority rather than the extension of the Kingdom values. The CSI needs to move away from an urban middle-class centeredness in its ministerial and missional consciousness and break a new path which it will find the rural congregation as the centre of its activity. Most of the programmes of the Church are still a feeble replica of the Western models.<sup>23</sup> The CSI has always faced up to the challenge of being viewed as alien to its own environment and social context. The same search should happen in the twenty-first century forcefully and effectively for a social involvement model in line with such a thrust.

In continuation of the above argument, I want to argue that the future of CSI, both from an ecclesiological and missiological point of view, will depend upon how the Church will be able still to strengthen and empower the local congregations. The rural congregations in particular will need support and encouragement to be an effective Christian community. We should not forget the fact that for the CSI, which is predominantly a rural based community, it is in rural areas that the real life of the Church is to be found. This is despite the fact that they are a magisterially and pastorally neglected lot. The grass root level social interactions and the faith formations, and the everyday forms of religious dialogue that are shaped in these local arenas are where the real witness to the love of Christ takes place.

There is another vital reason for such a priority. As we have noted, one of the problems that the people at the grassroots face is the non-accessibility to the hierarchy for their life and faith sustenance. Moreover we have also noticed that institutionalization has only made CSI into a very unwieldy organization, where some congregations might get less attention than they need. In such a situation, one of the challenges that it can take is to move back towards a congregational system, without

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23 Abel, *The Church of South India After Thirty Years*, 1978, p.30.



neglecting the organic and doctrinal unity that it needs to maintain as a whole Church.

Gnana Robinson's recent suggestion of channeling the missionary energies and the programmes of the CSI congregation towards a healthier and more relevant missional role is a pointer in the right direction. This is made especially in the context of the movement of significant number of missionaries, who are being sponsored by South Indian CSI Churches, to the North of India. Such 'in-country partnership' should be a forum for enrichment and mutual edification rather than repetition of paternalistic patterns. He especially suggests this North-South partnership between congregations and between North Indian congregations and Non-Governmental Organizations in the South.<sup>24</sup>

Failure to come to terms with growing religious fundamentalisms of all sorts and mutual religious intolerance can only lead to the repetition of missiological mistakes that Western missionaries sometimes committed a century ago. The Abel Committee evaluation after thirty years of the CSI challenged the outmoded approach to evangelism as follows: 'The Church has almost repeated during the last three decades the same pattern of work to evangelize others, namely, through preaching at street corners and in villages, and distribution of gospel portions and tracts... Still the approach has been one of asking people to come to us rather than pointing to Jesus in their own midst, among their own surroundings. The arrogant attitude of religious superiority and triumphalism with which we have gone about in our evangelistic work has proved to be counter productive.'<sup>25</sup>

In an evaluation of the CSI's fifty seven years of existence and experience, what emerges prominently is a history of its dynamic ecumenical selfhood. However, the fact remains that its Indian character and meaning as an authentically Indian Church is yet to arrive and take definite shape in a significant manner. In the future, the challenges of the CSI would predominantly relate to those issues.

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24 Gnana Robinson, 'North-South In-country Partnerships: Innovative Steps to Edify Congregations', *People's Reporter*, Vol. 17, July 10 – 25, 2004, pp. 3&7.

25 Abel, *The Church of South India*, 1978, p. 19.



